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UNIVERSITY OF THE COUNTRIES (1914)

Ruth Asawa

ART, COMPETENCE, AND CITYWIDE COOPERATION
FOR SAN FRANCISCO

Albert Lanier

ARCHITECTURE, GARDENS, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library



Regional Oral History Office
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University of California
Berkeley, California

The Arts and the Community Oral History Project

Ruth Asawa

ART, COMPETENCE, AND CITYWIDE COOPERATION
FOR SAN FRANCISCO

An Interview Conducted by
Harriet Nathan
in 1974 and 1978

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NOTE: See also, Albert Lanier, "Architecture, Gardens, and the Individual" at the end of this volume.

PREFACE

The Arts and the Community Series was undertaken by the Regional Oral History Office to document the state of the arts in the San Francisco Bay Area--especially in San Francisco--and to note the public and private patronage the arts have received in the past. In addition, the purpose is to trace new developments in federal, state and local governmental support stimulated by the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the emergence of state and local art councils and commissions. Early discussions with Harold L. Zellerbach and Philip Ehrlich, Sr. during 1970 presaged the on-going interest in and support of the project by the Zellerbach Family Fund of San Francisco. The Fund for many years has contributed to both traditional and community arts activities. Mr. Zellerbach provided the first memoir, "Art, Business, and Public Life in San Francisco" and served as chief consultant and advisor for the series from its inception until his death in January 1978.

The oral history process at the University of California at Berkeley consists of tape-recorded interviews with persons who have played significant roles in some aspect of the development of the West, in order to capture and preserve for future research their perceptions, recollections and observations. Research and the development of a list of proposed topics precede the interviews. The taped material is transcribed, lightly edited and then approved by the memoirist before final processing: final typing, photo-offset reproduction, binding and deposit in The Bancroft Library and other selected depositories. The product is not a publication in the usual sense but primary research material made available under specified conditions to qualified researchers.

The series on the arts and the community, with its focus on San Francisco, will supplement memoir collections produced by the Regional Oral History Office in such fields as Books and Fine Printing; Arts, Architecture and Photography; memoirs of individual artists; and the Social History of Northern California. The Regional Oral History Office is under the administrative supervision of Professor James D. Hart, the director of The Bancroft Library.

Willa K. Baum, Department Head
Regional Oral History Office

Harriet Nathan, Project Director
The Arts and the Community Series

30 March 1978
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

THE ARTS AND THE COMMUNITY INTERVIEW SERIES

Zellerbach, Harold L., Art, Business and Public Life in San Francisco. 1978.

Boone, Philip S., The San Francisco Symphony, 1940-1972. 1978.

Asawa, Ruth, Art, Competence, and Citywide Cooperation for San Francisco. 1980.

San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Project. 1979.

Snipper, Martin, The Art Commission and the Neighborhood Arts Project

Cid, Maruja, NAP Community Organization in the Mission District

Goldstine, Steve, The City, The Artists, The Project and Harold Zellerbach

Kreidler, John, Developing Employment for Artists; CETA in San Francisco and Alameda County

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Ruth Asawa was interviewed for the Regional Oral History Office as part of a series on "The Arts and the Community." The interviews were conducted by Harriet Nathan, interviewer and editor for the Regional Oral History Office.

Time and Setting

of the Interviews: Interview 1 - February 15, 1974
Interview 2 - March 15, 1974
Interview 3 - June 28, 1974
Interview 4 - October 25, 1974
Interview 5 - January 16, 1976

The five interviews were held in the family home of Ruth Asawa Lanier and Albert Lanier, on Castro Street in San Francisco.

Conduct of the Interviews:

Interview sessions typically began about 9 a.m. and lasted for two hours or more. After the interviews were transcribed, they were lightly edited, and submitted to Ruth Asawa for review and approval. She supplied a few editorial corrections.

In the family living room where her crocheted wire sculptures hung from the ceiling and projects in process could be seen in adjoining rooms, Ruth Asawa talked quietly over the tea and the homemade cookies baked in the same oven as her noted (non-edible) dough figures and plaques. Thoughtful, modest and direct, she emerged as a complex and even paradoxical figure as her story unfolded.

As a talented and liberated young artist married to architect Albert Lanier, she rejected professional offers (that included a housekeeper) in favor of keeping her own house, sharing in the rearing of their children, and weaving her art into the life at home. Home-loving as she is still, she now accepts invitations to travel to the east coast, to Alaska or Hawaii to demonstrate her techniques for creating art and building the community of participants that is intrinsic to her view of life and art.

A dignified and private person, she has done much of her work not in a private studio, but in the community with hundreds of children and adults, teachers and parents, public officials and businessmen, foundation executives and artists. She has led many of these groups in working together on mosaic and painted murals, planting and tending gardens, creating a publicly treasured series of San Francisco scenes for the Hyatt Fountain, or pulling together an inclusive art festival.

She was serious during the interviews, but would sparkle with sudden and endearing flashes of mirth. She gently disparaged the overemphasis on words and "all those school books and reading tests," but her low and pleasing voice would state her decidedly unconventional judgements and opinions in language eloquent with clarity and power. Spontaneous and undramatic, Ruth Asawa is a natural and charismatic leader, but one who can still question some of her own decisions and wonder at some of her own choices.

As an artist, she has felt impelled to practice her art, to create, and to recognize that time not spent on art can become the artist's enemy and the thief of talent. Yet she has spent months and years on public boards and commissions seeking to help artists organize, make their voices heard, and find ways to integrate them into the functions of government and public life.

Many people have written to Ruth Asawa. They have praised her work, and sought information and advice on many points: the formula for her sculptural dough, ways to deal with bureaucracies, problems in producing art. She understands that some were also asking how to live a purposeful life, how to make a lasting contribution, how to survive as an artist and a person. To those inquiring, she has responded in letters that are courteous and helpful, but the clearest answers may still lie in the life she leads and the work she does, day by day.

Harriet Nathan
Interviewer-Editor

16 June 1978
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

BIOGRAPHY

Ruth Asawa Lanier

Born: Norwalk, California - January 27, 1926

Education: Milwaukee State Teachers College 1943-1946
Black Mountain College, North Carolina 1946-1949

Group Exhibitions:

- 1948 Addison Gallery, Andover, Massachusetts (painting)
college students exhibit
- 1950 San Francisco Museum of Art (sculpture)
- 1953 Fort Worth Museum, Texas (painting)
- 1953 Tin Angel, San Francisco
- 1954 4 man show, San Francisco Museum of Art (sculpture)
- 1955 São Paulo, Brazil Biennial (sculpture)
- 1956, 1958 Whitney Museum of American Art (sculpture)
- 1956 University of Illinois, Urbana (sculpture)
- 1958 Oakland Museum of Art (sculpture)
- 1959 Santa Barbara Museum of Art (sculpture)
- 1960 Denver Museum of Art, Colorado (sculpture)
- 1962 Stanford University, Palo Alto (carved door)
- 1965, 1968 Contemporary Museum of American Craft, New York
- 1966 Religious Art Exhibition, Birmingham, Michigan (sculpture)
- 1967 San Francisco Institute (watercolors)
- 1967 International Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee (sculpture)
- 1967 Pennsylvania Art Academy, Philadelphia (sculpture)
- 1968 Mills College, Oakland (sculpture)
- 1968 Museum West, Ghirardelli Square, San Francisco (dough)
- 1968 University of New Mexico (sculpture)
- 1968 Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (sculpture)
- 1969 Museum of Modern Art (lithograph)
- 1970 Dominican College, San Rafael
- 1973 Van Doren Gallery, San Francisco
- 1978 2 man show, Fresno Art Center

One-man Exhibitions:

- 1953 Design Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts (sculpture)
- 1954, 1956, 1958 Peridot Gallery, New York (sculpture)
- 1960 DeYoung Museum, San Francisco (sculpture & drawings)
- 1962 2 man show, Ankrum Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1963 Shop I, Rochester, New York
- 1965 Pasadena Museum of Art (drawing & sculpture)
- 1969 Capper Gallery, San Francisco (drawings)
- 1969 Los Angeles County Fair (sculpture)
- 1973 San Francisco Museum of Art - Retrospective View
- 1973 Van Doren Gallery (lithographs)

One-man Exhibitions continued:

1973 Baxter Gallery - California Institute of Technology
 (sculpture and drawings)

1976 San Francisco Art Commission Gallery - Capricorn Asunder,
 "Honor Award Show"

1979 Cabrillo Community College; Cedar Gallery, Santa Cruz
 County Building

Public Collections:

1958 Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Mr. & Mrs.
 Howard Lipman

1958 Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, David Rockefeller

1959 Oakland Museum of Art - Purchase Award

1965 Williams College, Massachusetts

1966 City of San Francisco, San Francisco Art Festival -
 Purchase Award

1966 Addison Gallery, Andover, Massachusetts

Private Collections: (partial list)

Mr. & Mrs. William M. Roth

Mr. Herbert Fischbach

Governor and Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller

Rear Admiral and Mrs. Richard Ballinger (retired)

Mr. & Mrs. Louis Honig

Mr. & Mrs. Josef Albers

Mr. & Mrs. J. Hume

Mr. & Mrs. Walter S. Newman

Mr. Robert Howard

Mr. & Mrs. Hunter Land

Mr. & Mrs. John Bolles

City of San Francisco

Mr. & Mrs. Gilbert Smith

Mrs. Creighton Peet

Mills College

Commissions:

1963, 1965 Joseph Magnin Company - sculpture

1965 J. L. Hudson - Detroit sculpture

1965 Fox Plaza - fountain

1966 Ghirardelli Square - fountain

1970-1973 Hyatt on Union Square - cast bronze fountain

1971 City of Phoenix, Arizona - Civic Plaza - sculpture
 for pool

1978-1979 De Bartolo Corporation - Mission Viejo bronze
 sculpture

1979 Crown Zellerbach Corporation - bronze bas-relief

1979 Swanson Gallery - fountain

1979 UC Medical Center - memorial plaque for Edison Uno

Purchases:

1959 Women's Board - Oakland Museum of Art
 1966 City of San Francisco, Art Festival
 1976 Women's Board - Oakland Museum of Art

Fellowship Awards:

1965 Tamarind Lithography Workshop, September-October
 \$1,000.00
 1966 First recipient of Dymaxion Award for Artist/Scientist
 \$500.00
 1973, 1974, 1975 San Francisco Foundation Artist in Residence
 for San Francisco Public Schools

Appointments:

1968 San Francisco Art Commission
 1969 Reappointed
 1974-76 Reappointed
 1972 Council for Museum Education in the Visual Arts
 1973 BART Art Council
 1973 California Arts Commission, Visual Arts Panel
 1974 California Department of Education
 RISE Commission - Reform Intermediate & Secondary
 Education
 1974 National Endowment for the Arts - Education "Artists in
 Schools"
 1976-78 California Arts Council
 1977 Task Force on the Role of the Arts in Mental Health
 (President's Commission on Mental Health)
 1977 National Council for the Arts - National Endowment for the
 Arts Task Force on the Education, Training, & Development
 of Professional Artists and Arts Educators. Report,
 draft February 6, 1978, "Training and Career Develop-
 ment of Professional Artists." Final report to be distri-
 buted in 1979.

Awards:

1970 Osaka Expo
 1973 San Francisco Cable Car Award - San Francisco Convention
 and Visitors Bureau
 1974 Renaissance Woman Award, Renaissance Faire and Sir
 Francis Drake Hotel
 1974 American Institute of Architecture, Fine Arts Gold Medal
 1974 Japanese American Citizens League, Silver Biennium Award
 1974 California College of Arts and Crafts, Honorary Doctorate
 Degree
 1974 Business and Professional Women, Distinguished Woman Award
 1974 Robert Kirkwood Award - San Francisco Foundation
 1974 Phelps Dodge New York - "Salute to San Francisco"

Awards continued:

1975 International Women's Year - San Francisco Women's Round Table/United Nations' Association of San Francisco
1975 Council for Civic Unity
1976 Japanese American Citizens League, Contra Costa Chapter

Film:

1978 Ruth Asawa: On Farms and Growth, by Robert Snyder. Documentary film shown at the San Francisco International Film Festival, 1978. Masters and Master Works Production, Inc., 4143 Via Marina, #114-118, Marina Del Rey, California 90291

NOTE: A partial bibliography of materials associated with Ruth Asawa is on deposit in The Bancroft Library. A Retrospective View lists bibliographic items to 1973. An additional list including more recent items is also on deposit.

I PARENTS AND FAMILY, FARM AND SCHOOL

From Japan to the U.S.

Nathan: Your husband was saying that you might like to talk about your family and your own early beginnings, as a way of starting. First, when and where were you born?

Asawa: I was born in Norwalk, California, January 24, 1926, but for some reason it was recorded as the 27th.

My father came to this country in 1902 and his brother also came. When he was in Japan, he was seventeen and that was the time of the war between Japan and Russia. He was not interested in conscription at that time and he didn't want to go. So, he left Japan and came to Hawaii and lived in the sugar cane fields there. From there, he came to this part of the country and went to Salt Lake City--first to Norwalk, California, and then to Salt Lake City, where his brother and he went to raise sugar beets. They bought property and they made, at that time, what was a fortune. They made about \$60,000 by just sheer hard labor.

I'm skipping around a little bit, but in 1932, I guess, his brother became very ill--or 1929. In the twenties, his brother became very ill and this fortune was used up to pay for his medical care, and then that was the end of that fortune. I remember the stories that they used to tell about how they used to dig a hole in the snow for their icebox in the winter time in Utah. We were receiving, even in the late thirties, bills to pay the property tax on the Utah land. That was in the thirties and we never did do anything about that.

Then, in California at that time, you couldn't own property. There was a law that said that no alien could own property. I mean, from the East, you know.

Asawa: But, anyway, the two brothers worked together and their wives were sisters from Japan. In 1919, my mother came to this country.

Nathan: Were your parents married at that time?

Asawa: No, they were not married. He was sent pictures. You know, this was a time when they had the picture bride. My mother's sister was chosen to come and so her picture was sent to my father and he approved and sent for her. At the last minute, her sister backed out, so my mother said that she would come then, and that's how she came.

My uncle, who was married to my mother's oldest sister, came first and because his wife was so lonely, they arranged for another sister to come for my father.

Nathan: Were they all from the same area in Japan?

Asawa: Yes, the same, what they call, "prefecture." It's like a county or state. That was 1919 and that was in Southern California. They lived and farmed in Norwalk, La Habra, and I guess those were the two places that they farmed. They had a truck farm.

Nathan: Did they lease the land?

Asawa: They leased the land, yes. I would say they weren't very large farms; I mean, they were large to us. They had anywhere from fifty to eighty acres that they farmed.

Nathan: Did they have employees?

Asawa: They had a lot of Mexican workers and Filipino workers and those were the primary workers. We had a few white workers, but they never lasted. It was just such hard work.

Nathan: Was it very hot?

Asawa: Hot and hard and long, you know. Seven in the morning till five, the workers worked.

Our first contact with the Mexican workers was when we used to always sit under the water tank with them and we would eat with them, get a tortilla. They'd build a fire and then they'd heat their flour tortilla and then they would sit there and eat. We'd always go there at lunch time to eat with them.

At that time, we had Chinese neighbors, a farmer who was Chinese, and next to us we had a dairy ranch. We were right adjacent to a river, the San Gabriel River, which was a man-made river that took off some of the flood water from the mountains.

Asawa: Going back to my uncle's illness that time, I think he died in 1929 and left five children of his. At that time, there were already five of us. Then my sister was born the following year, and then another sister born in 1935. That was really at the depth of the Depression. My father was responsible for both families and at some point contracted pleurisy, or got pleurisy, and was very sick there a while.

Then, at that point, or very shortly after that, from about 1935 or '39, my aunt was very ill and she really remained ill until she died about five years ago. But her family grew up. There were two sons and when one was about seventeen, they went sailing. None of them could swim, but he somehow decided he was going to learn to swim by holding onto the boat, and he drowned. So, that was one of the first real tragedies for my cousins.

But there is the son who survived and he is now a physicist, and then three daughters. My aunt had three daughters. They are all living in Southern California now.

My own family--I have a sister in Washington, D.C., and two sisters and two brothers in Southern California, and another sister in Idaho.

Nathan: I see. What was your life like on the farm?

Asawa: To sort of describe the routine that we had--my mother got up about 3:30 in the morning.

Nathan: What was her name?

Asawa: Haru.

Nathan: And your father's name?

Asawa: Umakichi. Her maiden name was Yasuda.

Family Memories of Japan

Asawa: Going back to their Japanese background, you see, our name is not a common Japanese name. There's no one else but our family that we know of who has the name "Asawa." There's "Ozawa" and "Asano" and there are many other names, forms that sound similar, but our name seems not to be very common. Once when they were looking for me in 1955, they said, "There is no such name, Asawa." So, they thought, "Well, maybe another name," so they called a person whose name was Asano and somehow found me then.

Asawa: The story that we have, which is a tale--I mean, it's handed down to us--was that our name was originally Asano, that we came from Hiroshima, which is, you know, the place of the 47 Samurai family, or "Chushingura" (movie)--you know that. The story is that our family was sent away and so they fled to Fukushima, which is the prefecture that they settled in, and became farmers there.

My father had two or three brothers. One stayed in Japan and another went to Europe and we never heard from him again. He went probably to France.

So, as a child, my father used to sell--do you know what tofu is?

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: Tofu is bean cake and he used to also sell something that is called nato, which is a fermented soy bean. He used to walk early in the morning, before sunrise. He'd walk through the streets and he'd call out, "Nato-nato!" He'd go from house to house and he'd sell this fresh fermented bean and his family made that.

Then, my mother's side is sort of an interesting family. They're an ordinary family; they're not unique. But there were ten brothers and sisters and she was the youngest daughter. She had a younger brother below her. One was a tailor, another had a silk worm farm, and several of them were farmers. I can't remember what the others did. But they used to raise silk worms and they used to weave the silk.

Recently, we went to visit a friend here in Cupertino who has silk worms. She was trying to find out how something was done. I went with my mother. The woman was boiling the cocoon. My mother remembers doing this as a child, because she showed her how to take a boiled cocoon and stretch the strings like this [gestures] in all directions. This was then used. These squares were used to hold, you know, what you put into quilts, the filling, the batting. You'd put this over the batting so that it wouldn't bunch up. But there's something in the silk threads that acts like a glue or something so that it doesn't move. I had never known that she made the stretched cocoons, but she remembered very much about it just by seeing the spinning wheel that she remembers as a child.

My mother's oldest sister, during the Occupation, became known for her dried persimmons. She could show how to make the persimmon and how to dry it, and how she peeled the green persimmons, and left the stem so that she could tie and hang them outside. Then, at night, they'd bring it all in and lay it on a bed of straw. Every day, they'd have to massage it and gradually the sugar would come

Asawa: out of the fruit, and then it would end up looking like there was a layer of powdered sugar. This was the natural sugar coming out of the persimmon.

Nathan: And did it stay green, or did it turn brown?

Asawa: Oh, no. It turned brown. It was picked green. It was kind of an orange, but it wasn't soft. You know how hard those persimmons are?

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: Then they also used to use that green persimmon as waterproofing. They used to waterproof tubs. They'd slice a persimmon and then they'd rub it in. They would use the juice to seal the inside of a wooden tub, you know, just as we use paraffin or wax. They also used that to make--you know, like stencils. Stencil paper is always waterproofed. They do now, still, rub this green persimmon juice on the paper, which makes it waterproof, and then it turns the paper the color of that brown, like mocha, and then they cut their stencil.

Nathan: Have you ever used this system?

Asawa: No, I've never used it, but I've seen a lot of stencils. You know those intricate, fine, floral stencils?

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: I saw a whole stack of them that a friend brought from Japan. But that was the way it was used. Anyway, persimmons are a very, very important part of the Japanese life. They use the word "shibui," which probably comes from persimmon, which means, you know--it means like that (bringing fingers together). It's just right on the spot, or something that you can't really explain. It's just the right thing, enough of it, you know. But I guess it's the sensation of the puckering of the persimmon, if you eat a green one.

That was a sidetrack. Where were we?

Nathan: Let's see. You were telling a little of your family. I wanted to ask whether others were artists also in your own family.

Asawa: In my own family? No.

Nathan: There were, let's say, craftsmen and they did things very well, apparently.

Asawa: Well, you mean my mother's family?

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: They were all skilled in tailoring, in weaving. I have some kimonos that were made by my family and they spun and wove and made the cloth. I think they did, because the kimonos came from my mother's family. But none of them ever painted or were in pottery or anything beyond--I mean, I think the closest was the weaving, which was weaving the fabric.

Nathan: Right. Would pottery be the closest approach to sculpture as part of the Japanese tradition? Or is sculpture a part of that tradition, the artist's tradition, too?

Asawa: Well, the sculpture is very strong, I think, especially if you'd go back into the prehistoric pieces too, where there were villages. In the early times, I think it's history that they used to bury the servants with the ruler or the head of the house. But they felt that that was too cruel, so they made these Haniwa, these terra cotta figures, and when a man died, then the whole village went to work. They made these things and fired them and buried them. All the mounds were built in a certain direction, I guess. I don't remember whether it was east and west, or south and north. But, so, sculpture is very much a part of the tradition.

The difference, very often, between the sculpture or art in Japan and China is that one is very intricate, which is the Chinese, and generally the Japanese are much simpler in their design. But I think it varies with the period, you know. There are very decorative periods and very severe periods too. But I'm not an art historian, much.

Nathan: Only in what you have picked out that you need and can use?

Buddhists and a Quaker Church in Whittier

Asawa: Yes. My parents were both Zen Buddhists. As I can remember it as a child; it was not going to church every week. In fact, the only time we ever went to the Buddhist temple was a memorial service or a funeral. We did, as children, go to a Quaker church and that was the only Christian church that accepted Japanese in this town, in our community. We could not enter a Presbyterian, or a Catholic, or a Methodist church at that time. The Quakers' headquarters at that time was in Whittier, which is only five miles away from Norwalk, and they set up a church where they had a Japanese pastor.

The only reason I didn't go to it very much is when I was about five or six, I went and there was a fish pond there and there were little boats there. I reached way into the pond, fell, and

Asawa: they fished me out. The only clothes they had were the minister's son's clothes. So, I had to be wrapped in something and I refused to go back to church for a long time. It was not until I was about fifteen that I went back.

Truck Farming in California

Asawa: Going back to the farm, my mother woke up at about three o'clock and she got rice and vegetables cooked. My father got up about four o'clock and he would set the gopher traps all over our field the night before and he would go around and gather them all up. It was a boxtrap and he'd have a stick so he'd know where to find them. They were always such pests that we had to really keep them under control. Anyway, that was his daily routine and then he'd come home and have breakfast about six. Then he'd be out in the field when the workers came at seven.

Nathan: Did the children all have breakfast with him also, at the same time?

Asawa: We all had breakfast. We all ate and my mother was already out in the field by seven too. We all had to get up to get ready to go to school, so we all ate and then we went on to school. We had to walk--it seems like about three miles, but actually it was probably about a half a mile--to catch the school bus. We went on the bus every day.

The school was a grammar school, from first to eighth grades. We did not go to kindergarten.

School and Speaking English

Nathan: Was this in the town?

Asawa: In Norwalk. We didn't speak English until we went to school. We only spoke Japanese at home until our older brother and sister brought English into the house. But we never spoke it at home. I mean, I learned to speak English after I started school.

Then I went to school and I was registered under my Japanese name, Aiko. By the third year, the pressure was so strong to become Americanized that the name was changed to Ruth.

Nathan: Who changed it?

Asawa: The school recommended that we change it. But, actually, I was registered--I mean, my birth certificate said Ruth Aiko Asawa. But I used Aiko until, I think it was, the beginning of the third grade and then we changed it to Ruth.

There were quite a few Japanese children in the school and the Japanese children played together. It was pretty segregated. I can only remember one Black student in all the eight years there and that was in my sister's class.

Nathan: Were there many Mexican-Americans?

Asawa: Many Mexicans, yes.

Nathan: And was it your recollection that they came speaking Spanish?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: But everybody had to speak English?

Asawa: Everybody had to speak English in school. There was no language--ESL [English as a second language] program--there. But, as I remember, except for two or three, the Spanish-speaking students did quite well. The Japanese students excelled, particularly in math and even in grammar. I mean, in anything that had to do with memory work, they were extremely good, but once they had to start thinking, then they fell apart. That is typical. They could follow directions fine.

I remember only one very specific girl, one or two specific girl students who talked back. There was one girl and I knew even her name, Ramona Gonzales. She was a Mexican girl and she was very well developed, an almost mature girl, and she was the only person I remember ever talking back to the teacher in those eight years.

I was amazed at her and I sort of admired her for being that way, because in some instances she was right in whatever it was that came up. We all sort of followed, you know, and she would come up and stand like this, like a Spanish dancer [hands on hips], [laughter]-

Nathan: With real fire?

Asawa: Yes! She was really something.

Anyway, one of the things that I remember so well (I mean, I remember it now more than ever because I compare it with what we have now in school) was that we had, I guess, a relatively new building. The 1933 earthquake collapsed our auditorium, parts of the school. Anyway, they were rebuilt. But we used to have visiting performers.

Performers, Art and Music Teachers

Nathan: Artists?

Asawa: Artists, dancers, magicians, tap dancers, Mexican puppeteers. This was called an assembly and we had it once a month. We had at least eight or nine visits from professional people.

Nathan: Did the school sponsor this?

Asawa: Yes. This was done by the State of California. We also had a full-time music teacher and a full-time art teacher, and both of them I remember very well. Catherine Gregory was our music teacher and she, I think, must have been a frustrated singer because every chance she had, she'd sing us an aria. You know how when somebody sings hard or strains, a big blood vessel pops up in their forehead, sort of right here at the temple [gestures]. She used to go up and hit those high notes and then this would pop out. She'd go through all the drama of waving her arms. I was always impressed and the kids always thought it was so funny they'd snicker too. But then we would try to imitate her and try to get that. The thing that impressed us was that blood vessel there that would pop out and we couldn't do it because we weren't old enough to have that. Anyway, she was very good. She'd play the piano and sing to us and we'd sing.

In those early days we didn't have an education department and people weren't trained to become teachers, but were hired because they had a specific skill. Then we were much better off, because the art teacher wasn't taking an art course in art education. She was actually a practicing artist. So, I think that that affected me. It didn't affect everybody else in the family. It didn't make them artists, but I certainly think that did help.

Nathan: You caught a spark from her?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: That was because she was an artist?

Asawa: Yes. She was an artist, yes.

Nathan: Is this Gwendolyn Cowan?

Asawa: Yes. She used to have a temper that was so terrible and she'd go around chasing some of those boys with a ruler and all. She'd get so mad, she'd hit them and the ruler would break and they'd laugh. Then she'd get so mad she'd cry. But she painted and she really knew how to paint. She was impressive to us. I don't know what ever happened to her. That was a long time ago.

Nathan: Did she have materials so that you could paint?

Asawa: I remember doing a lot of large pictures for Thanksgiving, great big things--you know, the Pilgrims. We did a lot of things. We worked in clay and I remember that sort of specifically. Not that we did a lot of ceramics, but I remember a project we had of making a bird.

I worked and worked on the bird. I couldn't make it look like a bird and I couldn't figure out why it was wrong until another student had made one. Then I realized why my bird wasn't looking right. I had put a chin on it and a bird doesn't have a chin. If you notice, a bird has a beak.

We used to cure and stretch rabbit skins, and we did a lot of things, actually, when I think back on it. We built castles.

Nathan: Out of this sort of non-edible, play dough?

Asawa: No. The castles were made out of cardboard. Then we had a real garden, a school garden.

Nathan: That seems really very progressive for a small school.

Asawa: Well, the State of California was very far ahead at that time. They were much more ahead then than they are now. I think there are too many greedy interests in the schools now.

Nathan: Sort of self-serving?

Asawa: Self-serving, yes, built in so that it has nothing really to do with education.

We learned the Palmer method (of writing). We always used to get in rows like this [gestures]--first row, second row, and third row. If you started using your wrist instead of your arm, like this [gestures]--

Nathan: Oh, to draw those circles?

Asawa: The "O's" like this, we'd have to do. Then, if we were caught doing this [gestures flexing wrist] to try to make it accurate, then we were thrown out of that first row and sent back. That is one of the things that I remember.

Nathan: How is your handwriting today?

Asawa: Terrible! [Laughter] Yes, I have very poor handwriting, but I think it's readable. I mean, when I have to draw, I draw okay, but-- [laughter].

Nathan: Did you feel that she gave recognition to students who were interested in art? Did she encourage them?

Asawa: Oh, yes. She encouraged them very much. I remember, very much.

On the Playground

Asawa: I think the other thing that we shouldn't overlook was the amount of playground equipment that they had in the school. They had a large number of swings. They had slides. They had monkey bars, which were the kind that they climbed over. We had handball courts. We had the "maypole." I don't know whether you remember that. It's built on a pole. You can take one of these--like this [gestures hanging on], and you run and you go up.

Nathan: Oh, and it swings out?

Asawa: And then you swing out and out until you're off the ground. There were many things like that in our school, in the schools at that time, that I think don't exist any more. In some ways, when I think of it, everything that we have now has been so watered down or cut back that even the physical exercise is not there for children now, because everybody's worried about safety, liability, you know, lawsuits. I mean, if you skinned your knee, you skinned your knee. That's tough, you know? And I did that many, many times. I could still feel the burn from it or the burn on my arm. There are many things we learned to do, besides working out on the farm and at school. I'm not saying that I enjoyed it. I'm just saying that all these things happened to be there, and had to be done or were available.

Vacation and Onion-Planting

Nathan: So, you really had physical experience in addition to schooling?

Asawa: Yes. Christmas vacation meant that we were going to have to plant about five to eight acres of green onions.

Nathan: You planted them? There wasn't a machine to plant them?

Asawa: Oh, no. We did it by hand. You know how you buy your green onions?

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: The tops are cut and the roots are trimmed. In the field, rows are harrowed, you know.

Nathan: About a foot apart or so?

Asawa: Yes. They come up like mounds, like this [gestures]. What you do on this mound, you put two rows of onions.

Nathan: On the top of the mound?

Asawa: On the top of the mound. And you put the onion plants about four or five inches apart. What you do is you have your onions like this [gestures] and you take and you get your onion with your right hand.

Nathan: From your left hand?

Asawa: Your left hand. This is an onion in your right hand, and then you push it in and then you take this finger and close the hole.

Nathan: Sort of pinching it?

Asawa: Yes. You put it in and you pinch it, and put it in and pinch it. I mean, this is an endless, endless kind of row that you have to plant.

Nathan: Right. Well, it must have given you strong fingers! [Laughter] Just seeing those long rows ahead of you must have been discouraging.

(Thank you. These cookies look so good, I will have one. I somehow expect it to have a face on it, [laughter] or a cablecar. These are delicious.)

Asawa: After months of making play dough figures about Christmas time, Albert would ask, "Do we have any edible cookies?" [Laughter] I had been going twenty-four hours a day.

Nathan: You baked the figures right at home?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: How long did it take you? We'll get to that later, but I'm curious about how long it took.

Asawa: About an hour, an hour and a half.

Nathan: For each batch?

Asawa: Yes. We burned out a thermostat one Christmas.

Learning Language and Culture

Nathan: What a job! I wonder, just briefly, whether your experience in the school without knowing English somehow connected with your interest in bilingualism--you were saying you're going to be a bi-lingual education meeting today.

Asawa: The bi-lingual group has asked me to help them. What I'm trying to say is that the language is only one part of the program, that if you are going to go into the bi-lingual work, you have to go into the bi-cultural aspect of it, and that is the thing that will link you with the outside community. That's the thing that you can show the rest of the school. You can teach them paper folding. You can teach them doll making. You can teach them all of these things that are valuable to every child, whereas the language is only limited to those who are going to be interested in it. By the time you end up, you're going to have only a handful of people interested in the language actually, unless you develop the interest in the other parts of ethnic--

Nathan: Experience?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: That makes sense.

Asawa: Yes. I think that if they're going into the Japanese language, they should by all means, absolutely, include brush painting right along with it so the calligraphy is being the visual part of learning the language. They're learning also the painting technique, so that it all comes together. That's what we did as children. We went to the language school and we also learned calligraphy. Every week on Saturday morning we went to Japanese language school.

I resisted learning the language, probably psychologically, because you felt that you should really learn English. That was going to be the language that you'd use in this country, so you should do this. So, there was a resistance to learning, or a block in learning the Japanese language. Now, if it was only that language and no calligraphy for me, then I probably would have really blocked out the Japanese language. But having had the calligraphy with it--I think that was as much my interest in painting as making water color on paper, because when you do these strokes you're learning to write and you're also painting.

It's sort of the beginning of what we were talking about, about having dual interests, not being just concerned with painting or sculpture, but the total thing, the total act or the action. When

Asawa: you're working in calligraphy, you're not watching what your brush is doing, but you're watching the spaces around it.

You're watching what it isn't doing, so that you're taking care of both the negative space and the positive space. In a way, it's like if you begin to apply that in a practical way, if you talk about one person, if you concentrate on oneself, you don't really see yourself. But if you don't concern yourself with yourself and you begin to become aware of the people around you, then that defines you.

Work or School

Asawa: Getting back to the farm, I think the thing that made school so appealing was that the work on the farm was so hard that school was playtime. So, if you don't have anything you can relate to like that, then I think that's, in a way, sort of the tragedy of today's kids. They don't have anything, except for those who have to work, who work selling newspapers, who work four hours a day or work at a part-time job. Most people don't have something that's worse than school. [Laughter] So, I think that we loved to go to school. We didn't want to be sick at home. We knew that we would end up having to cook lunch or dinner, or even have to go to work. This is what my mother always used to say, "Well, if you don't go to school, you've got to work." So, we'd always go to school. But we all really loved school, the whole adventure of getting on the bus and going, and coming back, and the whole business.

One of the things which always embarrassed us was that for Christmas, we'd have to pack two sacks of vegetables to give to our bus drivers and that was their Christmas present. But anyway, they seemed to like it. [Laughter] But it was embarrassing to us.

Nathan: Did you bring presents to the teacher?

Asawa: Yes. We never celebrated Christmas very much. New Year's was really our celebration. We had a feast then.

Nathan: Did your parents ever come to the school?

Asawa: No, I don't think they ever did come to the school that I can remember.

Nathan: You had report cards?

Asawa: We had report cards.

Nathan: Were they interested in seeing your cards?

Asawa: Yes. But they never knew what was going on, never. My mother never learned to speak English. She still doesn't speak English now. My father spoke enough to get him through business and he could carry on a conversation. But neither one ever knew what we were going to college for or what we were going to school for. We were all supposed to study, but that's the extent of it.

Nathan: They had some feeling for scholarship?

Asawa: That was important, yes.

The Work Routine and Farm Life

Nathan: Were you, as children, aware that there was a Depression in the land?

Asawa: Oh, yes. Very much.

Nathan: It was discussed?

Asawa: Yes. We felt it very much. You'd get a nickel for a box of beautiful tomatoes like this [gestures] and you'd get 50 cents for six dozen radishes, you'd get 35 cents for a crate of cabbage and we'd get ten cents for beautiful melons like this [gestures]--for two dozen melons like that.

Then, on top of that, we used to get exploited by shippers who'd come in and contract with us to get all of our celery, all of our tomatoes--whatever it was. We'd pick and they'd pack and then they'd go bankrupt. Year after year this happened. This has happened because of an inability to do business, anything beyond the one-to-one arrangements.

Nathan: You really weren't in a position to get acquainted with a number of people and pick the best person?

Asawa: Right. We were just sort of powerless, and ignorant; it was really just ignorance.

So we worked and we worked and we worked and never got anything. When we got home after school--we got home about three-thirty--we'd work until about eight. Then we'd eat, and they would work on after dinner till about eleven.

Nathan: It was endless, really.

Asawa: Yes. Really a hard life, but I think it was good.

Nathan: What kinds of things did you eat?

Asawa: We always had rice. We had a big pot that was cooked outside. My mother had a pot. She made a wood fire. We had rice and pickles. We ate a lot of vegetables--cooked vegetables. Very little meat. Every week my mother would kill a chicken for us; we had chicken every week. My father refused to do that; my mother had to do all that.

Nathan: He was too tender-hearted to kill it?

Asawa: Yes. We once thought that we were going to raise some hogs. We had about four or five pigs. I'll never forget that. The time came to butcher them. I can still hear them squealing in the background. We had never eaten fresh pork; we'd always had bacon but never fresh pork. It's the last time we ever had pigs. My father couldn't stand butchering. The only thing we ever had was the chickens. My mother would have to chop the head off.

Nathan: And you had eggs?

Asawa: We always had eggs. We had a little hen house, and we had horses and we had a dog.

Nathan: Cows for milk?

Asawa: No. We had a dairy next to us. We bought a quart of milk a day. That was for all of us, so we drank very little milk. The only time we had milk, drank milk, was when we put it over cereal.

We ate the vegetables in season.

Nathan: Did you have fruit also?

Asawa: We always had fruit. My father always had a box of apples and always a box of oranges. Once a week he'd buy a box of apples and a box of oranges.

Nathan: Did you have the feeling that there was enough to eat as a child?

Asawa: Yes. Not anything luxurious, but we had plenty of lettuce (we would eat it out in the field), and we'd eat all the melons that got broken or were over-ripe. So we had really plenty of fresh food, fruit.

Nathan: What about clothes? How did you manage for clothes?

Asawa: We had very little clothes, actually. We'd work a whole summer and we'd each get about \$10. Maybe we'd buy a pair of shoes for \$1.95, we'd buy underwear and a couple of dresses.

Nathan: Did the girls wear pants to school?

Asawa: No. We always wore a dress.

Nathan: Did you hand-me-down from one to another?

Asawa: Not really. They never really lasted that long. We bought J.C. Penney clothes. We would wear a dress two days, and three days.

Nathan: Take it off when you got home?

Asawa: Take it off, wear it the next day. So we had two or three dresses for a year.

Nathan: Did other families visit you--other people in the general area?

Asawa: What was very interesting was we never had, except for our relatives, anybody in the house; nobody ever came into the house.

Nathan: Is that more or less traditional?

Asawa: Tradition, yes. We'd always go out and sit outside. They'd sit in the car and we'd come to talk to them in the car.

We used to have a bath house outside and I used to be in charge of the fire.

Nathan: Was that a special sort of tub--the traditional kind of tub?

Asawa: We had a wooden one at one time with a galvanized bottom, and then we also had a galvanized tub. There would be a wooden platform inside so you can sit so you wouldn't be directly on the metal.

Nathan: Yes. Was there a pump to fill it with?

Asawa: Well, we had a faucet; a faucet came in, and then we also had a plug that we plugged in, and pulled out to drain. Then whenever my mother was germinating seeds, like cucumber seeds, to get them started, we'd leave the water in the tub and we'd soak our bag of seeds into that.

Nathan: Because it was warm?

Asawa: Yes. It was actually conserving water and using that, and also probably even whatever came off of our body might be nourishing for the seeds too. I don't know. But I remember her doing that. She put radish seeds in a sack so that they would sprout faster.

Nathan: Did you have books at home?

Asawa: No. The only books we had was one set of the American Educator, which was an encyclopedia that some salesman came and sold to us.

Nathan: Did you actually use it or read it?

Asawa: I remember a couple of things in there, yes. My favorite was the page that had drawings to say 'What's wrong with the picture?' You know, the flag was going this way and the wind was going that-- I remember that very vividly. I'd love to find that set, because that was my favorite. That really was the extent of our books. We had a couple of books, but not really many.

Nathan: Did you play games with the other children in the family?

Asawa: Yes. We used to play games--Japanese games--sort of like a monopoly kind of game that was actually a war game.

Nathan: Is that "Go"?

Asawa: No. It was just kind of one of these number games. You step three and go back four--like that.

Nathan: Oh yes. Did you play team games?

Asawa: I'm trying to remember what we did. We fought a lot.

Nathan: That happens [laughter].

Asawa: We never hit anybody. We never really got punished, except once or twice when we really misbehaved. We never got spanked. We never learned to fist fight with other kids. Never could do that.

Nathan: Did you fight verbally?

Asawa: Yes. Or silently--not argue.

Nathan: You would not argue?

Asawa: Not much. Except I argued with my sister all the time; I had one sister who argued with me. For example, we never talked at the dinner table. We never had discussions. My mother and father always talked, but we never discussed anything. Also, we never asked questions; we never asked personal questions.

That's why when I talk to my family, Albert always asks, "Did you ask about this?" And I say, "No." We never talked about personal things, hardly. We do now but we didn't then. The word

Asawa: "love" is never used, or we didn't use it, and I think this is sort of a Japanese trait. I don't think it was just us; I think it was sort of a--what is it called, a more?

Nathan: I guess so, yes.

Asawa: You weren't nosy; that's very bad manners to be nosy.

Nathan: Did you hug each other?

Asawa: No.

Nathan: That again is part of this sort of private quality?

Asawa: Right. But my mother nursed us a long time. She nursed every child until the next one came. Some of us were two years apart, one was five years apart, and she kept nursing till the next one came. So we had that kind of--

Nathan: That contact?

Asawa: Yes. We were also carried on her back; she carried all of us on her back.

Nathan: Did one child carry another child?

Asawa: Yes. We all took care of each other.

I remember the 1933 earthquake. I think it happened on a Sunday. We didn't go to school because our school auditorium had crumbled or the gym had crumbled.

Nathan: Could you feel it in your house or in the field?

Asawa: Oh yes, we felt it. I remember holding onto kind of a wooden beam when it happened. My mother would tell stories about how people were swallowed up. We would envision ourselves getting swallowed up.

Nathan: [Laughter] Funny--that has reappeared so many times.

Asawa: But actually people have been--when the earth was cracked open, people fell in.

Nathan: Really? I wasn't sure that ever occurred.

Asawa: It actually is a reality. But anyway, we'd get scared. My older sister and I had to take care of the younger ones.

Nathan: Did you have sort of a special one?

Asawa: Yes, my older sister--my sister next to me. I'm not too close to her now. We're close but we don't think alike anymore.

Nathan: No. People change. When your father and mother and all of you were working on the land, was the land leased or rented?

Asawa: Leased. I think it was leased from the Suttons. The Sutton family owned it. One of the first farms that we lived on was I guess owned by Hargitt. We remained friends throughout the war. They were very good people. We also rented from a family named Strong. We were in Norwalk and La Habra; those were the two places that we had a real farm.

Nathan: Did you move?

Asawa: We moved to at least two different places, but I never lived in La Habra; I lived in Norwalk.

Nathan: What kind of housing did you have?

Asawa: Very primitive; just a board and batten house that was built with paper walls, paper ceiling and tin roof. It was built by my father.

Nathan: I see. The house wasn't provided for you by the people from whom you leased?

Asawa: No, not really. We built the house and built the barn, the garage.

Nathan: You really had to be able to turn your hand to many things.

Asawa: Yes. My father used to save every nail, I remember, and straighten it out. I had to repair boxes for tomatoes--that was one of my jobs.

Nathan: Those were the days of the thin, wooden boxes?

Asawa: Yes, right. Those boxes were always broken, so we'd have to repair a section.

Nathan: How did you get those little thin pieces of wood? Did you buy them?

Asawa: No, no. Actually there was a box company that used to build the boxes. Then as we used them, they would get broken and we'd have to repair one side or a bottom or something. So we were always having to repair those boxes and crates.

Nathan: So you had to learn how to use--

Asawa: How to hammer and take a hatchet and chop it so that you'd have a piece of wood that went like this [gestures], and you'd have to chop it so that you'd get this one little piece so that it would fit. Or if it was too wide, you'd have to chop it in half and sort of break it so that you could get that piece fit, so the radishes wouldn't fall through.

Nathan: Did you usually have a good crop? Were you children aware of whether it was a good crop or not?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Did the weather affect this?

Asawa: Yes. We had an irrigation system that we put in.

Nathan: Did you? You put that in yourselves?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: When you would move from one place to the other, would you pick up the irrigation system?

Asawa: No. These were all pipes. We had an engine, a pump house.

Nathan: But you would leave that when you moved?

Asawa: Yes, but we didn't move very often. We moved only once or twice.

Nathan: And your father laid the pipe system.

Asawa: Yes. I don't remember it very much, but I know that he did that.

Nathan: Was there a problem of water supply?

Asawa: No. We always had plenty of water.

Nathan: When you were a child there, did you have any idea of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Asawa: Oh, I wanted to be an artist. I had a cousin who was an artist and he was ten years older than I was.

Nathan: And so you got your wish.

The Hagiwara Plaque (1974)

Asawa: [Pause for phone interruption.] That was about the plaque.

Nathan: You made a plaque for the Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park?

Asawa: Yes. That's to honor the family that developed it, the Hagiwara family. See, they lived in the Tea Garden. They lived in Golden Gate Park.

Nathan: I didn't realize that.

Asawa: They lived in a house in the Tea Garden in exchange for designing and maintaining the garden. They had a little tea house where they sold tea and cookies and some pottery and some tea cups for their source of income. Mr. Hagiwara used to go out to work as a gardener, to support the family. They were in there until 1942.

Nathan: And then they were sent away to a relocation camp?

Asawa: Their home was demolished, and when they came back, they couldn't get the concession back.

Nathan: After they had developed it?

Asawa: Right. This injustice was felt by many people. I mean, they had no contract. That's a bitter pill, I think, for the city to swallow and, so, Isabel Bachels and the McLaren Society raised money and I agreed to do the plaque. So, two years later, it's in now. Yesterday we put it in.

Nathan: Where? I'll have to go see it.

Asawa: When you walk into the Tea Garden, when you go to the main entrance, to the left there's a big rock and the plaque is mounted on the rock.

Nathan: What happened to the family. Are they still alive?

Asawa: George Hagiwara, who is the grandson of the original Hagiwara, still lives here. There's a sister also in the City. They finally are doing something about it now and the McLaren Society would like to get that strip, that piece of street there, named for the family.

Nathan: That is Dianne Feinstein who's interested in this?

Asawa: Yes. She's very supportive of it. It's the Park and Recreation Department. So, we'll see what happens now.

Asawa: Where were we?

Nathan: We were in school. I did want to get you into high school somewhere.

Asawa: Oh, yes. [Laughter] Well, I graduated in 1939.

Nathan: That was high school?

Planned Visit to Japan, 1939

Asawa: No, elementary school. When I was ten, I was going to go to Japan to live with my mother's family for a year or two to learn Japanese. I was ready to go then, and my father's second cousin was going to take me. For some reason, he got sick or decided he didn't want to bother with it, so I never went.

Nathan: Was it usual to send the children back?

Asawa: Send somebody back. So, in 1939, I was 13 and I was already beyond the age of wanting to go to Japan, so, I didn't go. My younger sister went. At that time, she was nine years old. So, everything that my aunt had saved--you know, clothes and everything; she made ready for me with a trunk--my sister inherited. Well, unfortunately, she stayed until the war had started and she was held in Japan as an enemy to the country, with a police guard.

Nathan: She was interned in Japan?

Asawa: She wasn't interned, but she was watched in this community. The stories about how naive the village was, they were pretty incredible too. They would practice defense with bamboo sticks, and they were going to defend themselves from the American invasion with these bamboo sticks and these exercises. Actually, finally, when the raid came and the town was bombed--

Nathan: Was she in Hiroshima?

Asawa: No, she was in Koriyama, which is in Fukushima. They would submerge themselves in the river, stick their heads out of the water. But when she thinks of it and the stories that she tells me are just sort of incredible. However, one teacher was talking about Hitler because they were allies at that time: "Hitler, when he was a little boy, didn't sharpen his pencil like this [small gestures, sharpening]. He sharpened it like this, so that he shaved only the wood off his pencil. And that was part of his greatness." That was to impress the children about how they should be thrifty.

II WORLD WAR II AND COLLEGE YEARS

A Junior in High School

Asawa: So, anyway, in 1939 she went to Japan. I graduated and went to high school and majored in art at that time. I guess I thought it was pretty good for where I was at that time.

In that first year, we had the first modern dance teacher, I mean the first one in the State of California then. She came and she taught. Her name was Frederika Moore. I enjoyed it very much. That was my P.E. I studied art and I was very good in English. In social studies, I didn't do so well. In speech, I didn't do so well either. But I had a good time.

We had music. I'm trying to think of when it was. I think it was in high school that I was in a choral class.

I was in my junior year, I guess, when the war started. That was in December. I remember when we had an assembly that Monday and the principal was really extremely good about trying to calm everybody down and make us not feel too badly ourselves.

Father's Internment and the Bonfire

Asawa: It was a Sunday, I guess, in February, that we were working in the field and two FBI men came. They went and found my father in the field and marched him back into the house. He had lunch and then they took him away. Then we later heard from him from New Mexico.

Nathan: Did the FBI men say anything to the family about what was happening?

Asawa: They were interning him. I don't remember very much. I mean, I didn't really talk to them.

Asawa: My oldest sister went with my younger sister to Japan and she came back on the last boat from Japan.

Nathan: The older sister?

Asawa: The older sister. (My younger sister, Nancy, was left there.) So, my sister came back in October and the war began in December. With her, she brought beautiful books on art. I don't know how beautiful they would be now, but they were books on art.

I had taken fencing when I was ten here and my sister also. My sister, Lois, and I took Kendo, which was Japanese fencing, and we had all of the helmets and the guards and the gloves and the bamboo swords. That was one of the reasons my father was taken away. It was because we had studied Kendo. There was the Society of the Black Dragon and, apparently, they were accused of being the underground, sort of spies in this country, which we knew nothing about at the time. We were completely innocent. Somehow, as we put it back together later, we realized that some of the people went back to Japan, I mean, like even our language teacher. We weren't even sure that there was ever an underground network here and it was only, I guess, conjecture or whatever, trying to put it together. But now, I mean, all of that has been cleared.

So, that was why my father, partly, probably why he was taken away. So, all this equipment my father had gathered--the books, everything that had to do with Japan--they just made a big bonfire and burned all of that. Everybody had panicked at that time. My sister cried and she said, "Oh, please don't, don't burn the books!"

Family Internment: Santa Anita to Arkansas

Nathan: But the books had to go along with everything?

Asawa: Oh, yes. Everything Japanese was all suspect. I mean, in my parents' simple mind, you know. So, anyway, then, in April we were interned. We had to get rid of everything and we went in with two suitcases each. We did manage to take our sewing machine. We drove in with our cars and then they were all put in a lot and they were sold at the Blue Book price.

Then we went to Santa Anita for six months and that's where I met the artists from Disney Studios and they carried on school.

Nathan: They did this just of their own volition?

Asawa: Yes. I don't know if they even got paid anything, but they might have been paid \$8 a month as a teacher. Then, while we were having our classes on the bleachers, they had these camouflage nets that another group was making for the war, to be shipped.

Then, from there, everyone went to different parts of the country and we went to Arkansas. We went with a group from Stockton and Lodi and other places in California to Arkansas. Really, it was a very interesting experience. I think in each block there was a spy, a Japanese that was assigned to spy and to listen, or someone brought in, undercover agents to make sure that there would not be a riot. There was a riot. A man who was Korean was nearly killed by a mob. They really went after him.

Nathan: In Arkansas?

Asawa: In Santa Anita. I remember because I remember seeing this ambulance. So, everyone began to become suspicious of everyone in that time.

Anyway, we had baseball every day, which was nice, and we'd go to a movie and we had talent night. We had lots of talent in the shows there. We really had a good time, actually. I enjoyed it.

Nathan: Had you known the other Japanese families from the Valley, from Stockton and Lodi? Had you been acquainted before?

Asawa: There was a group from Los Angeles and a group from Stockton and Lodi. Then, recently, I went to Delta College in Stockton and five or six people came up to me. They remembered being in the camp where I was. One woman was in the same class with me, so it was nice to see her.

They ran a very good newspaper there. Barry Saiki was the editor of it. It was called the Outpost. I think the cartoonist was George Akimoto and I don't know where he is now. But that had all the camp news.

Then, we had teachers from all over the country. They were all white. Some were retired. Some were sort of couples that decided to come there to teach there.

Nathan: Was this at Santa Anita or at Arkansas?

Asawa: Arkansas. In Santa Anita, it was just students who were in college who came and taught geometry, or taught English. My sister taught English and then we had a teacher who taught geometry. So, we sort of carried on and then we were given credit for that semester we lost.

Asawa: Then we got to Arkansas in September, so school began. So, we really didn't lose very much time.

Nathan: What was Arkansas like, or the area where you were?

Asawa: Well, we went on the trains there and, during the day, everything had to be closed--the curtains had to be pulled. So, only at night we could open it and I remember that very much because I remember the Arizona desert, going across the desert. I don't know whether it was Arizona, but through the desert, and then we'd have to keep the blackout.

I can't remember, but I have a feeling we went through Chicago or through Missouri or somewhere there. We made very good friends with the Public Health doctor on the train with us. He's now in Santa Barbara. But that really was quite an experience, as I remember--people just in the aisles, everywhere.

But we got there and barracks were built, we had a public bathroom and a public laundry room. In each block, there were, I think, eight barracks and there were eight rooms, eight units, this way [gestures in rows]. In here, there was a kitchen and here was the laundry room, the laundry room/bathroom. So, everyone went and washed clothes there and then took their bath too behind their unit.

From Swamp to Garden

Asawa: This [gestures] was a cotton field that was used up, right next to swampland, right next to sort of like a forest swamp, you know, cypress trees and just really, really dismal looking. It was spooky, you know. But out of that came very interesting things. I mean, they had just chopped the wood from that area and built the barracks and were tar-papering it.

But my father, finally came back in 1945--he was gone three years. We didn't see him for three years.

Nathan: Could you correspond at all?

Asawa: Yes. Anyway, they discovered plants that they had seen in Hawaii and planted the seeds from them.

Nathan: That was the people in the camp?

Asawa: Yes. In fact, my father went into the swamp when he came back and he found this plant that he remembered as a boy in Hawaii. The only thing I remember, the name of it was poka, and I don't know what that is. It's a green, smooth-skinned fruit like that [gestures], with black seeds inside. It was green inside with black seeds. That's all I can remember about it.

And there were tales that they had discovered a prehistoric monster--I mean, a prehistoric amphibious thing.

Nathan: A living creature?

Asawa: Yes. It was something alive and they brought it in. I don't know what it was, really.

Nathan: Were they able to grow the fruit you spoke of?

Asawa: They grew it. What the Japanese did was quite amazing. This land that was good for nothing they turned into a garden, which was just the most exciting thing to have seen. I mean, they were growing these gourds and they were growing Japanese eggplants, just growing everything that they had remembered growing.

Plus, they had a lot of craft classes in the evening--wood carving, sewing, tailoring, and hairdressing. That was one of the nice things for my mother. It was the first time she ever had a social life with some women, in which she spent a little time talking and gossiping and chatting. They'd sit around and do each other's hair and my mother had never thought of doing that ever on the farm, but they had the time to give her a perm and do all the things that she had never done. So, it was really a nice time for her and for a lot of the Isseis, the first generation, the first vacation that they had really ever taken.

To Milwaukee State Teachers College

Asawa: My two sisters and brother went off to William Penn College, which is a Quaker college in Iowa, and then I went off to Milwaukee State Teachers College. The reason I chose that was because it only cost me \$25 to go. It was the cheapest thing in the catalog. I looked through the whole thing. Although I wanted to go to the Chicago Art Institute, it was out of the question, so, I went to Milwaukee.

They found a family that wanted a school girl to come and live with them and do their housework and babysit. So, that turned out fine. It was fine with me because I had no money to go to school on.

Asawa: So, the woman wrote me and said that she would be in a blue suit and she'd have a little girl with her. So, I wrote back and I said I would be wearing--I can't remember what I was wearing--but I'd be wearing this color dress. So, when I got to the train station in Milwaukee, I recognized her. It was an attorney's family and they had two children and I was there for a year.

Then I was given a scholarship by a Mrs. Thomas Potter or a Mrs. Thomas Potts of Philadelphia, who paid my tuition and some expenses.

Nathan: How did this come about?

Asawa: This was a Quaker group--American Friends Service Committee. All through this, they helped. They really helped students. My brother and sisters went to a Quaker college and they were given room and board and their tuition.

Fortunately, Milwaukee is a very good school and I met some very nice people there. There was the Conrad Schmitt family. They were in the stained-glass business there. The grandfather was from Germany and came as a stained-glass artist and set up a stained-glass studio in Milwaukee. Then Rupert Schmitt, his son, carried it on with his brother, and I guess two brothers carried it on from there. The two daughters have gone. They're in New York. But the son, I guess, might have carried it on. I don't know whether it's still in existence.

Hearing of Black Mountain and Visiting Mexico

Nathan: You met these people when you were at school?

Asawa: Yes. They were in the same class. I was in Elaine Schmitt's class and her sister Betty Schmitt was one of the students that went with this teacher that went off to Black Mountain for a summer. He was on his way to Athens, Georgia, to the University of Georgia, to teach, and so he took about six students to Black Mountain with him. They said he was a great teacher, but greater than he is a teacher named Albers. So, they all came back. They went just for a summer. They came back and they just wanted to go back again. I think some of them came back to get a degree and then to go back, because Black Mountain didn't give a degree.

Anyway, so then Elaine went for a summer. Elaine went with another young friend named Raymond Johnson that Elaine had met at Saugatuck, at the Oxbow, which was a summer school for the Chicago

Asawa: Art Institute. Ray came and visited Milwaukee and then he also went to Black Mountain College. So, then, just the following year Elaine went to Black Mountain. I was all hot to go to Mexico, so I went to Mexico that summer instead of going to Black Mountain. I studied with Clarita Porset at the University of Mexico, who, just by strange coincidence, was a friend of the Albers. She was interested in the Bauhaus, designing chairs and furniture. She was Cuban and her brother fought in the revolution and they were exiled. That was in 1934; Albers had come to this country in '33. She came and visited them at Black Mountain and then they visited her in Cuba. So, I met her.

Nathan: What drew you to Mexico?

Asawa: Well, my sister's going. She was interested in Spanish, the language. She was also in Milwaukee at the time. She had left William Penn College and she came up to the University of Wisconsin and she was in Milwaukee. She was going off to Mexico, so I decided I would go with her because I was just curious. I had no idea why I was going, but I knew that she was going, so I'd go with her. They tried to persuade me to come to Black Mountain that summer, but I went off [to Mexico] and I had a good time there.

Nathan: Did the art of Mexico get to you?

Asawa: Yes. I went to an art school there called Escuela Esmeralda de Pintura y Escultura. It was a sculpture and painting class and I studied with a teacher whose first name, I think, was Luis, and his name was Orozco-Rivera. It is not Orozco, nor is it Rivera, but it was both. Rivera was painting a mural then and also Orozco was painting a mural in another building. Then there was a teacher named Sanchez who was doing the priming, or doing the--I don't know what it's called--putting on the surface for fresco for George Biddle. George Biddle was also painting there.

So, this teacher said that I could go and be with him. He was going to show me how he prepared the wall for fresco. He'd only prepare so much and then, if Biddle didn't do it, then he'd cut around it so that there would not be any plaster that was unpainted, because they painted on a wet surface, a green surface rather than a dry surface. So, anyway, I went there several times and I learned how. He even let me use a trowel.

Orozco never turned his head when he was painting. Nobody ever disturbed him. He was on a great big scaffold and there was a big streak of red going across like this [gestures] and he was working on some big social mural.

Asawa: I guess this was another time that I went, but we saw Diego Rivera painting and we talked to him. He talked to us. Years later, in this conversation that I had with my sister about that experience, she said, "You know what he said to me?"--and I don't know whether he was saying it to me, because I didn't hear it. Well, it's just nonsense, but I guess he told her that I had a very interesting face. [Laughter]

Nathan: That's a charming compliment! He should know!

Asawa: We visited, I guess, Freda. I don't know how I met all these people. You know, it's sort of like a grapevine. You always go here and there.

Anyway, we went to Rivera's house, I think, as I remember it. Freda [Kahlo], his wife, I guess was there. We met a musician who writes music for player pianos. I mean, he wasn't writing it, but he was creating music on this machine, just by punching certain--

Nathan: Punching the holes in the rolls?

Asawa: Yes. I remember that it was like a ping pong table, you know, long and thin like this [gestures] with all these things, and that was very interesting. But that was just sort of an aside.

Nathan: Did you see any of Freda's pictures in the house?

Asawa: I can't remember. I just remember being sort of amazed by everything, the pottery and the costumes, but I have no memory of how I got there or who took me there.

But getting back to how we got to Mexico, at this college, at William Penn, there was a girl whose family invited my sister to come. We stayed with this family in Mexico and had a little room. It was where the grandmother did the cooking and in order to have hot water, they had to go through a lot of trouble, you know. You remember those water heaters that were like this [gestures] and you had to light it and you had to wait for the water to come through?

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Asawa: Anyway, we actually lived with the family there for three months and that's how we got to Mexico. I went to the University of Mexico and my sister also went.

Nathan: That was in Mexico City?

Asawa: Mexico City. That was a long time before the University was moved out where it is now.

Back to Milwaukee: Work, Artists, Teachers

Asawa: Then I came back to Milwaukee. The first year, I lived with the O'Brien family. The second year, I lived with a friend. Her name was Elizabeth Cristel and she now lives in this area. She was an older woman. She was about 37 when she was in school. She was going back to college, or she hadn't had college, so she came back and she went into early childhood development or childcare nursery schools training. I lived with her for a year and then, during that year, I worked in a tannery--you know, counting hides and working at the adding machine in the finishing department, for which I got 66 cents an hour, which was pretty good in those days.

Nathan: Did it smell the way I think it did?

Asawa: Oh, it was just incredible, unbelievable! I'd go through the place where they'd cure the things and I'd remember that one rabbit skin that we did when I was in the fifth grade. [Laughter] But that was the only thing I could find. They would not hire me anywhere because I was Japanese, but they did at that place and they were really very nice.

But I was working for room and board and a dollar a week the year before, so [laughter] I was getting up in the world.

The third year, in the meantime, I had met through the Quakers a very fine family, the Helmut Sieverts from Frankfurt. His wife was a violinist and because she was part Jewish, they had to come. They fled in 1937 and came to Milwaukee. His family came from a very prominent mathematics family. They were all mathematicians. He was a black sheep because he wasn't aspiring to that. She played the violin and this was the first experience I had with chamber music. They had a chamber music group in their living room and they would get together. There were two doctors and her. Well, you know, this was really very new to me. We've remained friends and they now live in Ithaca.

But (very coincidentally) their son and John Woodbridge's sister met at Swarthmore years later and were married. They live in Washington, D.C.

So, anyway, the third year, I went back. I had very good teachers in Milwaukee too. Robert Von Neumann is a painter from Germany and he fought in the First World War and he had a wooden leg, which he used to always have great fun with. He used to show it to his students. I think he's still living. Also, Elsa Albricht and Winifred Phillips. And there were some artists that I remember--

Asawa: Joe Freibert and Robert Schellin. And the head of the art department-- I can't remember whether it was Maurice Logan or-- Anyway, it was a very good department, actually.

On the whole, what's sort of interesting is that that class that we were in was a ball of fire, I must say. Everyone was adventurous. One went off to New York for a summer. Another went off to Black Mountain. Another went off to Mexico. The next year, it didn't seem like they were anything, but that group was quite interesting. I studied painting them.

Black Mountain and a Scholarship

Asawa: So, finally, I went to Black Mountain then and studied for a summer there. I went just for a summer and I got a scholarship from a church in Hawaii, The Church of the Crossroads.

Then, after that, I guess I was such a good worker--I made butter, you know, and helped on the farm--they offered me a scholarship. So, I was on scholarship all the time and that lasted until '49. I went in '46 and it lasted until '49.

Nathan: Maybe you had other qualities besides butter making! [Laughter]

Asawa: [Laughter] Well, actually, they had very good students there. I mean, all of them were very kind of full of ideas.

Nathan: It was stimulating?

Asawa: Yes. It was marvelous.

Nathan: I'm sure we'll hear more of Albers and Black Mountain later.

III WIRE SCULPTURE, HOME AND DISCIPLINE

Working at Home

Asawa: When I'm in the schools, nobody really believes that I'm at work. Our children wonder why I'm not home, in the kitchen, cooking, because that is what they're used to. They're not used to a person going out to work, so that they feel that my work is here at home. If I'm out there, I'm playing. I'm playing. [Laughter] Isn't that interesting?

Nathan: Yes, it is!

Asawa: It's very old-fashioned.

Nathan: Isn't it? How conservative children are. [Laughter]

Asawa: Well, I didn't leave the house until they were already in school. I did spend 20 years in the house working.

Nathan: Were you also doing some of your art then?

Asawa: I was working all the time. I was working while they were growing up.

Nathan: For instance, some of crocheted wire forms. [Looks at forms.] Do you actually take two strands and then work them?

Asawa: I take one strand and pull and I actually make every--

Nathan: Every loop? You don't buy a roll like chicken wire?

Crocheting and Monotony

Asawa: I make the loop and then I crochet the whole thing. So, I don't buy a row of that and squeeze it and shape it. It's actually made like a drawing, a line drawing.

Nathan: This must take very great strength and delicacy in your fingers.

Asawa: Well, I would say that it's probably one of the most monotonous activities. It's nice when it's all done, but it's very monotonous. It's like knitting. It's like crocheting. I'm going back to what we were saying about learning one discipline, learning like planting five acres of onions during Christmas vacation, or harvesting in July, all of these things. It's very easy in a way for me to do it because it's out of my own past, having worked on a farm and doing many things that were repetitive, like stringing the bean pole for beans to climb up on and picking the beans and sorting the tomatoes, picking tomatoes, sowing and planting onions and gathering them. All of these things make it very logical that I would select a way of work that would be very similar to that, only done in wire instead of plants.

Nathan: When you're doing a monotonous kind of task, do you find that your mind is thinking of something else, or do you have to concentrate on it?

Asawa: No, I think of many things.

Nathan: It sort of frees your mind?

Asawa: Yes. I usually work at two things at once.

Very often women don't delegate responsibility and at the end of the day they're tired. They've done all the ironing, they've done all this, and they've done all that. Well, I think that's a silly way to do things because I think that as soon as a child is able to learn something, they should be taught and they should be made responsible for all these things.

So, a woman who says, "I have children. I can't do this. I can't do that," I think they should really teach them many things--teach them to cook, teach them to make yogurt, teach them to make jam, teach them to iron, teach them to use the washing machine, teach them as much as possible. They won't like it. I'm not saying that they're all going to be happy, but it doesn't bother me if they complain. The expression, "I'd rather do it myself," is typical of parents because it's easier in the end. It's hard at the beginning, but if you can overcome that, then I think

Asawa: it's like the classroom teacher who delegates responsibilities to other students, or it's like us delegating the responsibility of painting a mural to the children, instead of our sitting there and grinding it out. We put them to work at a very young age.

All these things I apply out of my own experience. So, I'm not concerned with creativity and self-expression and all that. I think that that's just a lot of cornball theories on art. I think you have to teach kids to work and you can only teach them to work if you work. I found that out, that I can't delegate jobs if I'm not doing it. I mean, I can't say, "Go and weed the garden."

Nathan: You can say, "Come and weed the garden."

Asawa: "Come and weed the garden," yes. But you can't say, "Go weed the garden," if you're not doing it yourself.

Trying Out Design

Nathan: Thinking back to those first 20 years when you were running a household and bringing up the children and doing your art work, experimenting, how did it happen that you decided to remain at home during that period? I gather it was a decision that you made, that this was what you wanted to do.

Asawa: Oh, yes. Well, I had several offers. Say, for example, that was the time when the decorators no longer wanted to be called decorators; they wanted to be designers. When Jackson Square opened up and the whole thing of designed furniture, designed wallpaper, designed fabric--that was all a big thing in the '50s, right after the war. It was close to the war.

That was a very curious, interesting period, really a new idea. We made fabric designs and we went sort of through that. My husband worked for a decorator. They needed some wallpaper designs, or we did some things on fabric. We worked weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks and then, finally, in the end, we each got \$50 for our design.

Nathan: Oh, no! So, where did you find this group of designs?

Asawa: We designed them. Well, after all, we'd just come out of Black Mountain College. We were full of Bauhaus and the Institute of Design and graphic design. I think that that whole movement produced the kind of graphics that you have to do in commercial design. So, it was logical that we would maybe kind of go and seek an occupation that was not defined yet, so it was really an exciting time to see if there was something in it.

Nathan: Both you and your husband?

Asawa: Yes. He was working for an architect. But, you know, we were always doing these things together at the beginning.

And then paper folding. We were going to go into that and I had gone and gotten a patent.

Nathan: Oh, did you?

Asawa: We got a patent for a copyright on a wall surface that--do you remember the folded paper in the Museum of Art?

Nathan: Yes, on the right-hand wall?

Asawa: Yes. Well, that whole thing came out of Black Mountain College with Albers and the Bauhaus, paperfolding, and so on. I thought, "Well, let's see if you can do something with it commercially," and it was an adventure because we had never done it before.

Deciding to Remain at Home

Asawa: Well, you get into all of that and you quickly see that it's a rat race. It is almost sinister for a creative person to try to go into the business world. I didn't go into it very far, but I saw the kinds of people that were in it and I didn't like them.

So, if I had to be involved with that group of people, then I'd say that I would rather do housework, I'd rather garden, I mean, clean yards, and I would rather take care of children than get into that.

I was offered a housekeeper if I would come and work on designs. These would then be shipped to Taiwan or to India to be produced and brought back here. You know, that sounds very glamorous and appealing and a lot of people went that way. I chose not to do that.

Then a decorator in New York offered to take me as their artist and put me into Houston and Dallas. This was in the '50s. I was going to produce sculpture for them and they were going to put me into every showroom in the country. That was appealing too. That would guarantee me a living. They drop you after they've used you up.

Asawa: So, I did have opportunities to move in that direction. You know, I'd be in every catalog that they'd send out all over the country--3,000 [laughter] outlets, or whatever. And eventually, I guess, all these people go defunct or merge or do something else. But in every little bit of talk or information that I got from these people, I found that the artist was always exploited. Designs were taken, changed a little, and then produced and the royalties went to the company. That wallpaper design went on bedspreads; 90,000 yards was printed of that. We got \$50 for it.

If the person was intelligent about it, he would offer the royalties, because his fee for that must have been just enough to run that very fancy office. So that these people who are sort of middlemen or agents to artists, if they knew how to really treat artists fairly, they would get a lot more for themselves, for the artist. There would be kind of a mutual friendship that would be very useful.

But we saw so much in the early days. I mean, I was never tempted by any of that. I could envision myself traveling to New York and to Chicago and to all of the markets. We knew people who produced wallpaper and fabric. We'd see them every time they'd be in San Francisco, at the marketing. But that wasn't what I really wanted to do.

Commissions as a Sacrifice

Asawa: So, the investment was a lot slower for me in terms of time. I really never began to make a living--or, not a living actually--until only recently, in terms of my own work. Commissions are a great sacrifice. To have a commission is not a profitable thing.

Nathan: It isn't?

Asawa: Most often not, for an artist, because it's not like making a building. Very often a contractor has overhead. He has sort of a 25 percent thing in case something happens.

Nathan: For contingency?

Asawa: Contingency and increase of cost of living. Artists don't have those clauses in their contracts. When something takes two or three years to do, from the time the cost of the material increases, then you still have to absorb all of that and the cost of labor, whatever it is, unless you were able to deal with the whole thing.

Nathan: Or unless you could get such a clause written into your contract.

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Do you have an agent?

Asawa: No. I have to cope all by myself. And that's another question, of having an agent. That's possible too, but I'm not really interested in that either. So, this, for me, is a purely personal decision, but I like to sort of know where things go. It's a lot slower, but I feel that you have to be local, not in full control, but just in terms of direct relationship with as much as you can. But that's foolish too, because that's a problem that I have to face now personally in my own work.

Nathan: How to look at the way you come out financially, or how to organize it?

Asawa: Well, how to deal with it, because I do have many offers now for my own work and I'm committed to the school now.

IV DECISIONMAKING IN THE SAN FRANCISCO SCHOOLS

Chain of Command

Nathan: We might talk about art and other elements in the schools. You were saying that maybe a union of students would permit some kind of pressure to be brought by them.

Asawa: Yes. Well, I think the thing that we keep hoping is that the board will change or that the administrator will change or the teachers' strikes will make improvements, but actually they don't.

Having been deeply involved with the schools for the last six years, I've realized that the trouble with the school system is that the people in it are not people who are capable of making decisions. They are only capable of following and those who won't follow won't stand it and drop out. The structure is that the teacher doesn't make a decision and the teacher should be the first one to be heard and that person most directly involved with the students should have the highest say about what happens to the classrooms.

But the teacher cannot make the decisions because the principal is above him and the principal thinks that he has the power to make decisions. But when you ask him for something, then he has to then in turn go to the department head before a decision, or he has to go to the buildings and grounds if it's physical improvement. So, the principal has no power to make decisions.

Then, when you go to the heads of the departments, they say, well, they're assigned only this area and they can't say anything, but then they say that the one to decide is the administrative superintendent. When you go to the superintendent, the superintendent says, "No, the board makes that decision."

Asawa: The board is so far removed that they have no idea of what the problem is on the site level, so that you've gone through these layers of people who get more and more powerful and, yet, you realize that no one has any real power.

Nathan: You sound as though you have followed this all the way up.

Asawa: I've gone to all these people in order to get something done. I can understand the unions' demands, but the area they're concerned with is their own welfare.

Nobody ever comes up and says, "We need more supplies," or "We want to have the right to select our own books. Give us that budget. Let us choose the books that children in this class need."

All of this comes out in this newspaper article in saying that our reading score is low. But nobody thinks about the set of social studies books in the fifth grade that they waste because the children in the fifth grade class can't read them. Each classroom is required to have the English textbook, the math textbook, the social studies textbook; these books never get used and in two or three years they're obsolete.

So, books that have never been touched are taken and removed to the warehouse and a new set of books, a new theory, comes in. I guess Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and all of those companies, are just saying, "Well, we'll try this and we'll try that," and they sell a whole set of math books, English books, creative arts, and Intra-this and that, and none of it gets used. I shouldn't say none, but a lot of the books never get touched.

These are the issues. The real issues are never, never, never discussed or challenged because, if they were, then it would destroy the whole system. There is a Student Bill of Rights; and the parents aren't powerful enough; the teachers aren't strong. There's nobody that's really strong. Then the board. I mean, they really can't act because they're so far away from it. I was told by principals that they're not to talk to a board member.

They have to go through all of this business, so that they're treated like babies from the top man all the way down. So, how can they teach anything to the kids about responsibility, self-initiative? They don't have it. The system doesn't permit it to happen.

Nathan: You're describing a system where the greatest decisionmaking power is the farthest away from the classroom?

Structure and Productivity

Asawa: Yes. I think the decision should be local; the teachers should be held responsible for their kids and if they don't teach something, they should be thrown out. But we can't do that, because if we did that then we would not need an administrative structure. You see, I would say it's a welfare of a different sort, an acceptable welfare, because none of that has anything to do with the children. Children don't need it. It never touches them. Well, wouldn't you agree?

Nathan: That makes a great deal of sense to me.

Asawa: I feel sorry for children, but they're still young and they still have their life ahead of them. But I feel very sorry for those people who are good people--I mean, they're not bad people; they're really upright and respectable citizens--whose lives are being wasted. I just feel very sorry, but they allow this to happen to themselves, you know, and that's the sad thing to me because they're not productive and they could be so productive. They could make the whole system where they could be happy and they could feel that they're really doing something, instead of being caught in a Rube Goldberg machine that doesn't work.

Nathan: You feel that it is basically the structure that frustrates people who really could do good work?

Asawa: Well, now, I'm saying that the structure will always exist. I'm sorry for the people who allow themselves to be put into this structure. This is something that I hoped that I would never do, having been an independent person. I make my living by my work, so I am about as direct as anybody can be in knowing where I'm going and what I'm doing.

So, I think that if more people would do this and if more people could show children how to do this, then I think that we will have less and less people having to be forced into a system that doesn't work. If the system doesn't work, then you get more courts, more patrols, more control, more of this, and less and less independence.

Then we keep thinking that we're going to do this, that we can solve it--

Nathan: But we're heading the wrong way?

People with Skills

Asawa: We're going the wrong direction. We started on the wrong premise and we keep going that way and we keep thinking, hoping. It's like the fork in the road; when you take the wrong turn, then you'll never make it back. I'm not saying that I feel hopeless. I think it's possible to correct things very easily and that's why I think that our solution in our program is so easy; to get the people who have skills and put them in front of the children. There's no better way to do it and I think that it does help them. It does help not only the children, but it helps the teachers and parents and makes their whole organization healthier in a very simple way and a local way.

Nathan: Like what you're doing in the art program, bring skilled people directly in touch with children? Do you see this as possible in other educational areas?

Asawa: It can happen in any area and I think that's the thing; when you begin to do that, you begin to threaten the whole university system, the whole college education. They're producing these teachers that go into the schools and they're producing them out of theories that have nothing to do with the children. The reality of it is today that you don't need to have a college education to help the children. The things that the children need are understanding of their immediate surroundings, their home. It's terrible to say that it's the schools' fault.

I don't blame the schools at all. I say that the schools reflect the quality of the community. I think I've said that before. But the proportion of creative thinking that's in the community is reflected in the schools. If it's not happening in the community, then it's happening even less in the schools, but I think it's proportionate. So, the problem really is that there are so few creative people.

I'd like to elaborate to complete that thought about people who don't make decisions. So, okay, then this group, which is the school system, gets federal money. Then they will not deviate from the guidelines. Now, if I were to get some money, I would not take any money that I had to fit into guidelines. They're always talking about guidelines. They say, "Oh, you can't do this, you can't do that. You have to do this. You have to schedule. You have to have so many hours of this, community input."

You see, they themselves are being told how to spend this money. So, finally it's controlled by the federal government--what's the point of government anyway? Suddenly you say, "Well, that's my money."

Asawa: Finally you complete the circle and say, "I'm a taxpayer. That's my money. Why can't I say how this should be spent?" After you go through all these steps, which we add, you come back and you say, "Are we all crazy?"

Then you begin to say, "Well, the only thing you can do anything about is yourself," and finally I've come to the conclusion that that is really what, in the first place, I intended to pass on, that one has to make one's own decisions on one's own future. But, if you do that, that's a pretty risky thing.

Nathan: Because you're putting yourself outside the hierarchy, and outside the structure?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: The structure which protects you in a way, even if it destroys you a little?

Asawa: That's right. Yes, exactly. But all we're trying to do is we're trying to make that work. I think it's ideal to work within the framework of the school because it does have the set-up. You have the staff, you have the children, and everything is taken care of, so that you don't have to worry about these things that will destroy anything that you might have, a good idea.

All you need to do is to move right into this with a program and the program happens to be people, people with skills and people with information that is useful, because I think that it's not going to really matter very much exactly what you do. I think it's going to matter very much that we know how to survive. Maybe it won't matter that you have a garden, but I think all of these things matter very much, if they have really practical information.

Nathan: To put you in touch with the real life that you're living? What kinds of skills do the people have that you are bringing into your program? Are they what? Painters?

Asawa: Painters, yes.

Nathan: People in ceramics?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Do you feel that the children get the idea or recognize the value of what is being presented?

Asawa: Oh, I think very much so. I think that it's probably the first real experience that they have. What is important is that it's giving them an opportunity to make decisions.

Mural at the Fort Mason Pier

Nathan: What kind of decisions do the children make?

Asawa: Very simple decisions. For example, we're painting a wall, a mural. For example, we did use the Fort Mason fishing pier, which is now being used by the Police Department for a fishing program.

Nathan: A fishing program?

Asawa: Yes, a weekend program. If you are a child, you can go out and fish at Muni Pier, except it's polluted now. They asked if I could find some painters to work on this boathouse. So, that came about. So, I said, "Why, sure. Why couldn't we do it for the children, because it's a children's fishing program?" So, we got children from Hunters Point. They asked for children from a school from Hunters Point and then we selected one from the Marina because that would be the two ends of the city. Golden Gate National Recreation Area (a national Park) provided the paints. We provided the children and the artists. The Maritime Museum gave us information for a field trip there. So, the children fished out there and they had a field trip out of it. Then the Police Department primed the building and then at the dedication we did some fish prints. We printed the first fish that was caught.

Nathan: You printed the first fish?

Asawa: Yes. We made a fish print of the first fish that was caught.

Nathan: [Laughter] A fish print! You dipped it in ink?

Asawa: No, no. We sponged ink on it.

Nathan: You sponged ink on the fish?

Asawa: On the fish, yes. Then we pressed rice paper on top of it to get all the scales. Then the boy who caught it got a print, the Police Department got a print, and the Park Service got a print. So, it was a way of getting people together, each one giving a little bit so that each one can take the whole back. And they will all get books.

Nathan: When we put all of this together, I would love to be able to have one of these prints [gestures] and one of these books [gestures] deposited in The Bancroft Library too because these are such very fine examples of what you are talking about.

Can you tell me a little more about how you prepared for this project?

Asawa: Our artist at Winfield Scott, Nancy Thompson, and a classroom teacher and I went to the Maritime Museum to do some research and get familiar with the whole thing. They, in the classroom, did sketches of marine life, you know, whales and--actually, we were thinking of the Bay, but they did a very serious study of the hammerhead shark. Is it hammerhead whale or shark?

Nathan: I think it's shark?

Asawa: Shark, yes. And whales and crabs and octopus and hydra and all these, so that it was real research with something that you have to be very accurate with. Then, when they went to the site, they had their sketch, they chose their colors, and they chose the size, how big it was going to be and where it was going to be. All of these don't seem terribly important, but I think that that whole experience of making simple decisions is just like planting a bulb; although one doesn't think very much about it. All of those things put them in contact with a very real experience where they actually physically, emotionally, visually, mentally participate or take part in doing something. Not only do they do something for themselves, but they have had, in a way, a chance to do something for the community.

A Matter of Direction

Asawa: It's a very simple experience to have done all of those things and, on top of that, when they are through, they are proud. The evaluation's there and they can see what that thing did; they see what they did. They don't need somebody to come in and test the child to see if the reading level is here. You see, that's another thing that I think in terms of their testing. I question. That's the wrong direction. That's stupid. But this whole system is based on a reading-level test which doesn't mean anything at all, so that scoring is a great disservice to parents. It scares them away from creative thinking because they say, "This is going to really hurt our program." They say, "Cut out all of that. Those kids need to read. Those kids are going to need to learn to count." Well, you know, the reality is nobody has to count any more; you just put it in a computer. You don't need to count. You don't really need to read because if we need anything, we have it all on television. Who reads? The reality of it is, who reads these days? The only things that we read are reports, studies, but we don't really read any more.

I mean, I'm not talking about you, but I'm talking in general. So, the schools are spending millions on a computer to locate absenteeism in the school system and that's not going to matter. It's not going to matter whether they're attending or not. The real

Asawa: question is maybe we are going in the direction that only those who want to learn will come to school, because that's really what's happening now. The kids are out fishing or doing something else.

So, going back to the students, if they were really serious about it--I don't know how they can care. They don't care. I don't know how they can possibly care about school. I can understand that the problem is that a lot of teachers that strike are very good teachers and want change. That's why I can't say striking is bad, but the strike will not change what needs to be changed in the system because nobody is willing to do that part.

Nathan: Do you think that there is a way that change can come about in the system?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: How?

Asawa: I think there has to be a better balance of community people.

Nathan: Working--?

Asawa: In the schools, yes. And I don't mean only community people. I'm talking about highly skilled professional people, like writers, poets, attorneys, people that are in the business world, who are interested in people, coming into this and becoming involved.

Nathan: As volunteers? There is a school resource volunteer program in Berkeley. That sort of thing?

Asawa: No, no. I would say that the school system has to hire people into the school. I think the volunteer is important. I think that's essential. But I think that that's sort of given; that's always a handout and they'll take that. I think that they have to want it; they have to realize that that's important.

Nathan: Would you start off with board members in order to make this change come about? Is that the first level at which decisions are actually made?

Asawa: Yes, that's the only level at which decisions are made, unless you have an energetic principal, unless you have an energetic teacher at the site level. I mean, there is no real leeway for decision-making. A principal can't choose his own teachers. He can't even select his own aides. He can't select para-professionals, although they're beginning to. If a principal is tough about it, then he could try. But if there's an opening, say, for art or science or math, he can't select. Very often they will take whatever is sent them.

Asawa: So, I think that all of these things have to be done on the site level. A principal should be given all of the possibilities of selecting his staff. Those things should be done at the local level and the board should make a mandate, or whatever it is that they make, saying that the responsibility is on the principal's head and, if he doesn't perform, if his school doesn't perform, it's his baby and he's got to make it work.

Nathan: In a sense, a delegation of responsibility.

Synergetics

Asawa: That's right, yes. You see, it's Buckminster Fuller's idea. This friend who is teaching at Santa Barbara City College, is Mervin Lane, who went to school with us at Black Mountain. Mervin Lane credits Bucky's ideas for this approach that he has, which he calls the "Synergetic Approach to Learning." He has his classroom approach, which I think is so simple and so needed. I shouldn't even talk about it because I'm not sure that I would be saying the right things about it. But the idea would be that, for example, if you go into a classroom, instead of the student-teacher relationship of 1 to 40, he divides it up into groups of five or six. So, he has the 40 divided into eight groups in a classroom, or six groups. If there is a problem, he gives the problem to the groups and then each group, each person, seeks a solution. Then each one corrects each other's. This system can happen with a million people; this can happen without changing the system at all.

Nathan: Is this sort of a cooperative problem-solving?

Asawa: Yes, yes. And, so, the teacher flows through, throughout the room, like this.

Nathan: Oh, one teacher can handle it?

Asawa: One teacher makes a teacher out of others--there's a teacher in each group.

Nathan: That teacher is a student?

Asawa: That's a student. They put their ideas together, ideas that they bring to conclusion. Then that idea is moved to another table and then switched for theirs. So, that all the ideas can be applied. It's what we apply to our program. We feel that instead of a teacher dittoing a bear and saying, "Now, you color this bear," then, in a classroom--say you have 40 kids--you say, "We're going

Asawa: to do a study on bears." Every student is responsible for finding a solution for making a bear. So, then, when we come together, you have 40 answers to a bear, and then each student is given 39 other ideas besides his own.

Nathan: And he has to put them together?

Asawa: No. Then what he does is he sees; he learns about 39 other ideas. That's an example of a bear. You can apply that to math or you can apply that to anything. That's why story-writing or anything can be used. So, the teacher is not dittoing all these bears out and the Christmas tree out and all of the valentines out, you know, and then sweating it out.

She gives blank paper and every child is forced to begin to make decisions--the research, the use of the library, the use of his mind, or a magazine. When he sees it in a magazine, he may cut it out of an ad, or he might see it on--what is it?--Olympia beer or something like that, or Regal Pale has a bear on TV. So, his consciousness is awakened. You can't measure any of this, but all these things happen.

In terms of making a mural, we have 400 kids, and they all have to make a commitment that's permanent. They do it once and it's there every day and people pass by and they see it; they see it at recess and they see it at lunch. It reinforces a kind of thing which doesn't take an extra teacher, or a para-professional. All of these things come out of seeing their things hanging, you know. I just have these things always there. You can have all these things that they do once and every time they walk in, that's where the person's eyes look. I know that just by having my own work hanging. Even if it was done in 1950, it can still reassure you that you're capable of doing something. So, an insecure college graduate, not knowing quite what she's going to go into, is not going to have that to give to the students.

Nathan: Do you have any cases where students are not willing to fulfill the commitment, or want to stop halfway through? How do you handle that kind of thing, or does it ever happen?

Asawa: Well, it doesn't happen very often. I would be interested in seeing what happens finally when this whole idea becomes established. It may not have the same effect as it has now, simply because it's still the carrot in front of a turtle, or whatever it is. [Laughter] We're still in that stage now.

It's clear in my mind and maybe not everybody sees it--that we are not trying to produce artists. We are only trying to exercise the part of each person that is problem solving, so that if they have

Asawa: this sort of experience, they apply this. It's a method. It's a method of attacking a problem and it doesn't have to be in art. It can be in how to reroute the traffic, or how to get across to the other side of the Bay. It has to do with how you cope with problems. That's what I think I'm trying to do. I don't know. Others probably are hoping that they can go and sell things on the street or plaza, or somebody hopes that they can learn a technique so they can tile the bathroom. Everyone has their level of concern or interest, but I see it as making it possible for young people to quickly switch if they need to and scrap everything that they've done and start over again. That's what I have to do with every project that I do, for a commission or whatever.

I'm not so terribly interested in repeating, although, just in the nature of study, I repeat many things. But it doesn't scare me too much to go into a project that I know nothing about, such as the school system, which is what it has been, plunging right into a system, not with the idea of overthrowing the system. I think that the system is perfectly set up; the mechanics of it is perfectly set up. The only thing that stops it are people who try to retard and to stop things from happening.

Nathan: Do you think they're perhaps afraid of change or afraid of innovation?

Asawa: No. I'm not sure what it is. I think it's because they haven't exercised this, that they don't know how to do it. I think it's purely mechanical, because once they get it, they love it.

Nathan: Yes, I was thinking how warmly you have been received.

Asawa: Yes, they really love it. Like now nobody thinks twice about painting a mural on the wall, but they don't remember how impossible it was to do.

Nathan: Right.

Procedures for Hiring Consultants

Asawa: So, I think that there are many areas. Just the other day, I wrote a letter to the president of the school board, Dr. Hopp, and I said, "Why can't the procedure of hiring consultants be changed so that they're not burdened with all of the people that they already know. Why don't they delegate that responsibility to their staff?" Apparently, they don't trust them.

Nathan: You're thinking then that the principal would be the one who would determine to hire?

Asawa: Yes, it could be the principal who would hire. I'm saying that the process, the procedure of hiring somebody may take two months, which means two months are lost because we have to wait for this process to be cleared. But why isn't it possible for a principal to decide? We're making decisions; the parent coordinator or the artist coordinator and the principal decide how it's going to be spent and they go ahead and do it and then hire, which means that if we decide today that we want somebody, in two days, three days, or in a week, we can get that person and they're in and out and paid, so that we don't have to wait for staff approval, board approval, on something that has already been tried.

I would say for things that are new, I can understand it. But why do they--when they have such really, really, desperately pressing issues--why would they not trust somebody? I think that if you don't trust anybody, then they don't perform for you. You know?

Nathan: That's right.

Asawa: Well, I'm just as guilty of that myself. I sometimes am. So, let's take like in the classroom, when a teacher doesn't trust a child who puts two suns in the sky. All of these things are a reflection of how they are treated by higher-ups, so that they don't allow children to make decisions. Therefore, children don't learn to make decisions. Therefore, they grow up and they won't know how to do something that is basic and essential to their own personal welfare, emotional, mental, and physical welfare.

But it's all very simple-minded. You know, it's all so simple that I don't know why we don't do it.

Nathan: The way you describe it, it does make sense.

Asawa: Yes, it's very plain.

Self-Reliance and Learning What is Important

Asawa: I think one of the tragedies of this whole thing is that it does reflect back into the basic unit, which is the family. The family no longer knows how to make decisions, so they delegate it to--

Nathan: To the schools?

Asawa: To the schools. They delegate it to the psychiatrist to solve their problems. They delegate all the responsibility. They delegate it to the AAA to protect them, to life insurance. I'm talking about us.

Asawa: I'm talking about all of us. I'm not talking about art decisions, or this occupation. But we delegate everything, so that we no longer know how to make decisions any more for ourselves and we don't hold ourselves responsible any more.

So then we have to go out and seek employment so that we can pay for all these things that are protecting us, but finally we lose our own sort of humanity, or personal decision-making.

Nathan: So, you feel that self-reliance is really the key to being able to cope with your life?

Asawa: Yes, I think that that is fundamental and that's the most valuable thing to me personally. That's more important than anything else. Maybe that's just my view. But I think that in trying to work everything out, I think that that is sort of the purest state of mind that I can think of. Maybe I'm talking about a state of mind too, which I think requires the highest degree of discipline.

Nathan: Now, does this whole process that you were describing--learning how to accept responsibility and make decisions that you're teaching children to do through the art program--do you feel, then, that this promotes self-reliance? I'm wondering whether this has some relation to discipline also, self-discipline.

Asawa: Well, you have to learn discipline. You know, you have things that will teach you that. If you live on a farm, the discipline is already predesigned in that, so you have no choice.

Nathan: How is that? Certain chores?

Asawa: Well, now, I'm saying that if you don't plant in a certain time of year, then you don't have a crop at the end, or if you don't weed, or if you don't thin out your plants, you don't get a head of lettuce; you get leafy lettuce. If you're trying to grow iceberg lettuce, then you have to give each plant space, so you have to thin out. Or when you plant onions, you have to have three or four inches between. Otherwise, you won't get the size. These are all sort of natural rules of growing things.

If you take yourself as nature, as an onion, or you take yourself as a body trying to develop into a dancer, you have to do the same thing. There are certain requirements that will produce a dancer or a musician or a potter, but these are rules that you don't make. You don't just decide, but there's a physical fact of life, so that if you had the discipline in dance, that you can actually apply that to anything later on. But there are certain basic rules that are not your own. I think that if you learn that there are these rules, you can choose not to do it or to do it, but I'm just saying that I think that people don't have those opportunities.

Asawa: I think that there should be a dancer from the San Francisco Ballet going into the schools. They should be hired by the school system to teach any number of classes. I think it's too bad that it's only limited to a very few people, because if it were possible for any child to have this experience--

Nathan: A dance experience, for example?

Asawa: Yes. Not just those on scholarship and not on all this business of poverty and minority this and that, but actually, if we really felt the importance of it we would extend it--but there's nobody that feels the importance of it. But if we did that, we might find two or three or four or five a year of real dance potential. But, at the same time, we would be teaching the general public, a general group of children, a certain amount of good habits that could be applied at different levels.

That's why I think when you give quality, you raise the level of consciousness of a lot more people than by what we offer in the schools, or what we offer our own children. People don't really give their children very much. I can say that even about my children. I think that we give them as much as we can, but they say, "Oh, there's nothing to do," and there is a lot to do.

But, on the other hand, what I'm talking about, that consciousness may come much later, way after, way after we're gone. One of the examples I will cite just with one of our children is that we've always had books on Albers and letters from him and they're always saying, "Oh, Mom." But then, when he left to go to college--

Nathan: One of your sons?

Asawa: One of my sons, yes. He didn't want to go to museums, to galleries, any of these things. He said, "Ugh!" He couldn't stand it. So, the first thing that he wanted was a print or a drawing to take back with him, a sculpture to hang in his room. So all of the things that are around you, they affect you. So it's interesting.

Then, one of his teachers started talking about Albers and when he came home he looked into the books that we had on the Bauhaus. So, it's not important that you convince them.

Nathan: Just expose them?

Asawa: You just live with the things that are important to you. In the end, it's what is important to oneself that really matters and I think that's what a person can convey to another person, if something is important to them. They won't necessarily find this that's important, but to find their own things that are important to them.

Nathan: With the kind of conviction that gets passed along?

Asawa: Yes, yes. I think that's quite true.

Nathan: I was thinking just briefly of the grant you received recently. Is it from the California Arts Commission?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Is this something that you will use in the schools, or will this be another project?

Asawa: No, this is for the schools. It's an expansion of twelve more schools.

Nathan: How many does that make altogether?

Asawa: Twenty-seven. So, now, at this point, the question is: Are we going to repeat the ineffectiveness of the system that we're challenging? That's really the thing that we have to begin to evaluate and really face and decide: whether we should get bigger, or should go into depth with fewer schools.

Some of those who have been in our program feel that if we can strengthen the schools that we are already in, maybe that is more important than going beyond. But our proposal was to expand and to experiment, so we will try to do both.

Nathan: And that will suggest that you will need to trust certain people to make decisions.

Asawa: That's right. We have to. Because we believe that each site has to decide its own needs and program, we will have to trust them. We hope that everybody remains honest in our program. There's not enough to be dishonest.

V ART AND ARTISTS IN THE SCHOOLS

Artists Working as Artists

Nathan: Are you more or less full-time, now, with the school?

Asawa: The Artists in Residence grant from the San Francisco Foundation is for me to try to do what I think has to happen in the schools. So, although there is nothing really tangible, concrete, if I continue to work in that grant, I would like finally to have several concrete things that are permanently fixed into school as part of the program that I would like to do: to bring artists into the schools not just to do children's work, which is, I think, what we have been working with to involve the children, but there's also the level that we have to have artists come in as artists, doing their work and then leaving pieces there.

If businesses wanted to do something for the community, rather than putting money into a program to bring students to Dow Chemical, or bringing students to Bank of America, or bringing students to GMC, or something like that, and spending money on buses and tours, they should do something that is really concrete in a school.

Nathan: How would this work in the school?

Asawa: It would work in the school to make something that is given by Bank of America, so that instead of dressing up their own building, they begin to move into the community. That's one of the ways in which businesses, private businesses, can do something for our schools.

Beginning to Work in the Schools

Nathan: Thinking back to when you first began to work in the schools, was this when Harold Zellerbach became interested? Or you interested him? How did you get that started?

Asawa: I had worked in the schools independently, going on lectures, bringing out a little thing on "This is How I Became an Artist," two hours of this to inspire the children. Well, I did that several times around the school and I said, "That's nonsense." They'd pay me \$25, which was nice, to just go in for two hours and do this little thing. Every once in a while, the PTA would have \$25 and they would pay an artist to come in to show how an artist is an artist. But that was the extent of the involvement.

That was before I came on the San Francisco Art Commission. This was while the children were growing up and I was trying to do something. I belonged to the PTA, the Parents' Club, community advisory, all these things on how to improve the schools. It's all busywork.

So, finally, when I was appointed to the Art Commission in 1968, I said, "The area which I am concerned with is our schools and I would like to concentrate on our schools." Well, the Art Commission said, "That is a problem of the Board of Education. They have the money. It's their responsibility. That's their job. Our job is art." Some of the commissioners did, you know. So, I said, "Okay, okay. I won't do it as something with the Art Commission."

So, we started in our own neighborhood school.

Developments at Alvarado

Nathan: Which school? Was that Alvarado?

Asawa: Alvarado, yes. Sally Woodbridge and I and Nancy Thompson--these were the three artists that were artist-parents, all had children in that school. We started with them and then a core of about 14 parents.

We started with throwaway objects and do-it-yourself, milk cartons, egg cartons, a little here and there, this and that. The art department gave us \$25 for flour and salt for that summer and the rest of it we put in ourselves. That was successful, so we continued in the fall.

We had our planning with the art department and the principal and Sally and I got together in the spring for the summer. We happened to be in summer session, so we used our school to begin. No one felt that it was a long commitment. We were just doing it for the summer.

Asawa: Then, one of the regular teachers was teaching there and Robert Pult said, "This is what we need for the whole year." So, we continued in the fall and then, in the spring, we absolutely had no money. We had been full-time. So, I asked Mr. Zellerbach, and he and William Roth and his mother--those were the first three and I'm not even sure whether this was a private thing from Mr. Zellerbach. Anyway, all three of them privately gave money to the program.

I went to the Museum and the people who were on the board--

Nathan: That's the Museum of Modern Art?

Asawa: The San Francisco Museum of Art--to try to make them interested in it. At that time, they were in the building program, so that they thought, "You know, all of this is children's art. This isn't art. This is--." I don't know what they thought it was.

But, anyway, I think the real support we had was from Mr. Zellerbach.

Nathan: So, he stayed with you?

Asawa: He stayed with us for the whole time. Then the Rosenberg Foundation came in in our third year, third and fourth year they helped us.

Nathan: Are they especially interested in children's art?

Asawa: Yes. And we did get \$2,000 from the board.

Nathan: The school board?

Asawa: The school board, during that time. But it took us a year and a half to be paid that.

Nathan: Is that right? Now, this was the one with the tile mural?

Asawa: Yes. This was a whole program; the mural was only one part of it. We had gardening, workshops, and we had a lot going on. And like everything else, things fall apart, you know. When the people who are interested are not there, the plants die, the grass grows. So, we realized that unless the program becomes part of the curriculum--I mean, even now it's really shaky. If the program goes away, then I don't know if anybody will continue. But I think that my idea is that the Art Commission is, should [be], the artistic leadership in this city, so they should be involved in it and every city department should be involved in every other part.

Nathan: I see. You were, then, reappointed to the Art Commission?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: For roughly a four-year term?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: So, you were reappointed in '72, or in '71. In any case, your appointments are continuous.

Asawa: No. I completed the term of Sally Hellyer when Mayor Alioto was elected. I was appointed to fill out her unexpired term, which was a year. In 1969, I was reappointed until 1973, and I was now reappointed again for another four years.

Nathan: That's interesting because it does take a while, doesn't it, to get things rolling?

Asawa: Yes, it takes a long time.

Nathan: Right. And the Alvarado program did receive some support, didn't it, from the state?

Asawa: From the California Arts Commission, yes.

Combining Parents and Artists, Teachers and Administrators

Nathan: And do you have someone at Alvarado who will keep that going, or will this still be something that you take primary responsibility for?

Asawa: Well, we're planning to have two parents, one to do the bookkeeping, which would be just the paperwork, and then one who will actually take the responsibility for the program. Right now Joan Abrahamson is doing it. She's putting it all together. And we have a parent already that we think will be the one because we feel very strongly that parents should be involved in it and, at the same time, we think that a parent program cannot do it alone, that it has to be a combination of artists and parents. Artists alone cannot do it either because they don't have that bridge or that investment in the school. So, if we have a combination of parents and artists, with the teachers and the administration, then it's a little slower and it's more natural. It's a little more home-grown, but I think in the end it will have a greater effect, the Artists in the Schools coming in and bringing in professionalism. That's what I'm talking about, the combination of existing staff with people who are knowledgeable of the outside world, not in business, but in the artistic world, to come in so that the students see and are in contact with practicing artists.

Nathan: This is a slightly different way of doing it, by bringing the artists and the parents together?

Asawa: Yes. See, the Artists in the Schools Program doesn't have the parents in it at all. They have a professional dance company coming in and doing a little workshop with the parents and with the children, but they don't really have the ongoing thing that we have. They don't have it year round. They have it for a three-week period. But the combination is very important. I think that we need that, you see, because we could also train parents to do very simple skills to pass on. There's that. There's that group that we're training that's important.

But we need somebody with ideas so that the ideas don't keep being just play-dough or macramé. We need somebody who keeps opening up more and more things and that's why an artist is important. One way that we feel that it can happen within the framework is to utilize the teachers that are in tune with what we're doing and free them from the fixed scheduling that they have. If they begin to study their own resources within the school, a school has everything. It has the shops, it has homemaking. It has the art department. It has the science lab. I don't think that they have enough equipment, but I'm saying that they have all the things that they need. All they need is somebody with an idea for the program.

So, what we're talking about is to bring in people who can make the teachers change.

Nathan: And it wouldn't necessarily be the same people year after year?

Asawa: Oh, no. It should be rotating because nobody should become stagnant in it. Artists are not interested in getting caught up into the whole teaching rat race. I think that with the loss of job potential it's even more critical that we get rid of tenure, because education is learning and once you've taught something then somebody else should take your place so that you are not repeating yourself, unless you yourself are growing.

I think the whole idea of tenure is against education. I mean, you should do that in a job situation. You may be able to do it. But in education you shouldn't be stuck with it. I think there are advantages and disadvantages and I think that people should have some kind of security provided, but I don't think that one should settle in, especially in a school situation.

Nathan: So, really, you could have people coming in to teach for a while and then doing other things. Artists could come in and be there for a while and then go on to something else, so that it wouldn't be just a permanent staff?

Asawa: Yes. It should be a continuous thing, but it shouldn't necessarily have to be the same people. But also, at the same time, they should understand how long it takes to do a project. They should see the entire process. I mean, for example, how long does it take to do a fountain, or how long does it take to do a huge tapestry?

Nathan: How long did it take to do the fountain? Let's say the Hyatt Fountain?

Asawa: From the time we signed the contract, it was two and a half years. Then, three months before that, I worked on it before that too. I presented a sample which took me about three months on top of that.

Nathan: So, it took three years really.

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Right. And a tapestry would be a very long process too.

Asawa: Yes. So, number one, the children have uncommitted time for 12 years without responsibility. In that time they should be given the opportunity to take the kind of time that it needs to do something. I mean, take, for example, gardening. If you had to go out and do it for a living, you couldn't do it, but if you could provide that information in a school it doesn't matter if you make money or not but you teach them a real lesson.

Nathan: Responsibility and care?

Asawa: Care every day, feeding it, watering it, weeding it, all these things. That can happen in the responsibility of cleaning up the cafeteria. It's just a responsibility of sweeping it or of scrubbing the walls in the school. All of those things should be a part of the whole learning process so that the classrooms have some learning. If it's not related to picking up after yourself--I think that that's far more important and that's part of what I'm talking about. It's taking care of oneself and being responsible. You know how hard it is to teach your own children that. Every day, "Pick up your shoes." Even I have a problem, you know.

Nathan: It's hard for me to make myself do it.

Asawa: Yes. [Laughter]

Books and Murals

Nathan: We were just looking at some small books.

Asawa: Ernst (the tie company) gave us these fabric pieces. All the students in one class made these hats and so we wrote what they did.

Nathan: Oh, I see. And then they typed it. It looks like--what?--a little print?

Asawa: I'm not sure how they did it. I think these may be potato prints.

Nathan: And the students did this?

Asawa: They did the drawing. They did the originals and then there's Valerie Ferrer, an artist-printmaker, who's in our program now who has a print shop. So, she did this with the idea to show teachers how they could do this just on the Gestetner or on the ditto machine. They should do more of this with their classes.

This is a mural that we've done with the Pier Four at Ft. Mason. [Shows mural] As I said before, this was with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the San Francisco Foundation and the Police Fishing Program. These were all things we did with the Maritime Museum. We had a field trip to the Maritime Museum down at Aquatic Park and the students did some sketches and then they went over there from the Marina and from Hunters Point, two classes. We got two classes to paint this mural.

Nathan: [Looking at mural] Oh, some of them are brilliant.

Asawa: They were very brilliant. The idea would be that they could use these for books and give each child one to take home that participated in this.

Do you want a little more coffee?

Nathan: No, thank you. After our conversation about cleaning up after ourselves, I felt I couldn't possibly leave a cup there [laughter].

Asawa: [Laughter] It's not a special program that I'm talking about. I'm not talking about a special person or a special technique. I'm just talking about how much we can do for ourselves.

Nathan: I was thinking too how crucial it is to make that transition from your leadership at Alvarado to whoever is going to do it next.

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: I gather that's what you have been working on at the Alvarado School.

Asawa: Yes. It may or may not transfer, but, on the other hand, if it makes it possible for murals to be painted, and for schools to ask the community to help select the color of the building, I think those are very major changes. That doesn't have to depend on anyone any more because if that becomes policy that opens up the opportunity that we want--to have a community garden, or if we could put up a new piece of playground equipment which was never permitted before. I think that those are sort of the changes that I'm talking about and it hasn't cost anybody anything. It doesn't cost the school district anything. It's just simply changing their thinking a little bit.

Nathan: Do you suppose there's some sort of fear of controversy--that if these decisions are made open to the community there will be different opinions that have to be reconciled?

Asawa: Well, I think that's what we should try to do, to open it up so that each school is not the same and that more people are involved in the decision-making. Even if they fight amongst themselves, it's better that they are active and thinking about it than if they're not doing it at all, or that they're not allowed to do it. I think that we're now going into the real problem of mural painting. See, we went to the Board of Education and we painted a mural there.

Nathan: You did? In the building?

Asawa: Oh, yes.

Nathan: Who did this?

Asawa: Well, we got students from Commodore Stockton and Edison School. We got the first and second grade classes from Commodore Stockton and a mixed group of fourth, fifth and sixth, a special ed class, from Edison. We painted a wall. We offered to do it and we got the okay to do it.

Nathan: Was it the Board that made the decision?

Asawa: No. We went through the Buildings and Grounds, Milt Reiterman. Then we got it on the wall and the next day the Art Department was getting calls about something in writing and about meetings about it. They were getting a little pressure, I guess. Now they're asking that we have a meeting with the union and the Buildings and Grounds, the Art Department, and somebody to represent--to talk about which walls. With every mural that we put up it sounds like--I don't know, we may have to have a meeting and approval by everyone.

Asawa: So, I think it's not really necessary to do that because these murals are not permanent. I mean, they can always be painted over.

Nathan: Are they mounted on canvas?

Asawa: On the wall. No, no. Right on the wall.

Nathan: Can you describe what that mural looks like?

Asawa: Well, it's just very free. There's an area with a lot of fish and boats and one area that represents the Mission District with palm trees because the school's on Dolores Street. There are some trees and things in the sky and we have a couple of school buses in there and Dr. Hopp put a little spot on and somebody from the music department put a note on there. It was fun. We really had a good time. But we're going to have to get help from the union. We haven't met yet. I don't know whether we'll meet or not.

So, my question will be to ask the school district which schools are going to be painted and if it's not going to be done in the next two years, then we'll go ahead and paint a mural. We're not trying to take jobs away from the union, but if that wall isn't going to be painted for two years, there's no reason why a mural couldn't be on that wall. When they're ready to paint they can whitewash it so that we could paint another one in two years. So, they should not feel that jobs are being taken away, but that this is a learning experience for the children that's an extension of education outside of the classroom, that they will be able to do something out in the community.

That's the same way with the boathouse; the children contributed something to the entire community and experienced this. It's right over there by Aquatic Park. You can see across and you can see this little boathouse where Al Capone stood--you know, it's Alcatraz pier. They sent their prisoners from that pier. It's right there by the pump house.

So, the children really get a real experience. They learn something. They also contribute something in a very painless, easy way without feeling that they're doing something great. They're having a good time. They went fishing afterwards.

I think that they should look at the school not as an institution to provide jobs for teachers, and teachers as workers to be represented by unions but as the primary tool for providing all children with a basic education. Now only part of these children can do it because they don't have enough brushes. The equipment isn't working. I would like to give Buildings and Grounds a list of the kilns that are not in working condition, or shop tools that are not in operation. You

Asawa: can just forget your project if you need a kiln that's not connected. And, on top of that, they have a kiln that is one cubic foot for a school of 400 to 700 people. They have a kiln that big. [Gestures] [Laughter] You know, that is outrageous that they don't even understand the educational process.

They shouldn't be concentrating on whether the children are painting a mural on the wall and spending all their time worrying about the union. They should be concerned with operation, I mean with the operation of equipment, so that we can work.

For one example, when I loaned a sculpture to McAteer High, we clocked it to see how many manhours it takes. If you take the phone and call somebody and say, "Is it okay to do it?", if you get somebody to do it, it wouldn't take you more than two hours to go from here to there and get it installed. Well, they had to get two men who had to come to look at it. Then they got a truck with four men on it to pick it up and then they dropped it there. If it weren't for a parent who kept pushing to get it done, it would still be in the storeroom at the school.

Nathan: They didn't even put it in the right place?

Asawa: They didn't even put it up. They just stored it. Then another crew had to come and set it up. [Laughter] You know, that's very costly. We're paying for all that labor, whereas we feel that that kind of time should be put into things that would benefit the children. Of course, having it there benefits them, but they're not worried about that. That doesn't bother them. But it bothers them that we're putting a mural up.

Nathan: When you do a mural, is there some sort of overall scheme or plan that is agreed upon?

Asawa: Generally a theme is discussed, talked about, sketches are made by the children, beginning sketches, and then we sort of designate outlines. We draw the skyline and the hills and the water and the city and the roads sort of generally. Then, within that framework, they put it in. And they may do something historical, like the Levi Strauss panels that were done downtown in that building [at Embarcadero Center]: one area was the gold country, another area was the ships of San Francisco, and the other side was sort of night life and entertainment. So, one was mining, one was the ships, and the other was the night life or the local scene in San Francisco. In general, it's very loose.

Nathan: Does each child have a specific area to paint in?

Asawa: He selects it. The first ones have the whole thing and the second group has to adjust to what is already there. The parents and the artists come and put the background in to tie it all together because generally children paint a lot of spots that may have meant something to one child. They will not mean anything, so they will paint them out when they're doing the background. So, the little children, unless they paint their own background with it, paint their thing and then their background, then we just blend it in from there.

To Lick and Mission

Nathan: You were talking about the early beginnings in the San Francisco school system, in Alvarado School. Then did you move along, as your children got out of grammar school?

Asawa: We followed that first year through. The second year we went to James Lick Junior High.

Nathan: You had a child in James Lick at this time?

Asawa: Yes. All of our children have gone to James Lick, but this was our fifth child. That was when we began the program. She was a sixth-grader at Alvarado and, so, we went on. I think we actually started before that group went with an art teacher there. We've always been involved with the art teachers there at Lick and one of our very good friends is Alan Brooks, who is a painter. He's now at City College, but he taught our children and was probably the best teacher during that time, but there are other teachers that we don't know about.

Anyway, we decided that we would sort of follow them. We don't have a list of the names and we haven't recorded them--we probably should have, but we haven't. But anyway, in our fifth year--that was last year--we went to Mission High School. That's when we got the high school. So, you know, I can walk down there and all these children say hello to me because they remember the program. They're not all in it. They're not all interested, but we have a few that are still active in any project that they see going on because it's an independent program. It's not scheduled or locked into.

Moving Parents from Home Classes to Schools

Nathan: Before you went into the schools, did you have any kinds of classes in your home for your children?

Asawa: No, I didn't have children's classes. I always had children coming in and out and doing things. But I did have a group of mothers who came to draw. I think it was in 1953 or '54 when a mother who had gone on to study art came, brought her child, drew, and then we would go to the park, let the tricycles out of the car and they would ride around the band concourse or Dolores Park, wherever there was a children's playground. And then we would draw. We'd draw the children and we'd draw the animals, or we'd go to the zoo, and wherever we went, we took our sketchbooks with us. Then they had classes here too. About five or six came.

That was a time, I would say, in the '50s when that seemed to be a very good thing to do. Then, gradually, I guess, in the '60s, I began to realize that if parents were to become involved with something, they really should become involved in the schools, so that instead of coming to study with me, when they'd want to study art, then I would say, "I think really what you would like to do is to start to get involved in the schools."

The reality of it is that I know that when a person begins to be involved in art at a late age, like after their children are in school and they want to do something and be busy and be into something they've always wanted to do, I mean, I think that in a way will always remain recreation, simply because the other commitment is too great. They have to maintain a house. They have a life that they have to keep running and they can't ever be committed in a way that a student can be committed to art, studying art, when they're younger.

Also, having started at that age, they can't give five or six hours to learning to draw. They come and they draw and then they go on to the hairdresser, or they go on to church, or they go on to a PTA meeting, so that they can never really concentrate the way you need to if you want to become an artist. So, it's sort of a recreation thing for them.

So, I'm hoping that our program--I don't think that we can actually say it's that concrete--but what we're trying to do is to bring artists into the schools so that they teach the children and the parents can learn by helping, so that that's a much more efficient place to be learning these skills. That's why it's important to have artists in the school.

Nathan: Because the parents learn as well?

Asawa: The parents can learn something there and, so, if we can make that work stand, we can then make the school a learning center, a community learning center, not just for children, but for the community people. You can satisfy a lot of needs in one action,

Asawa: you know. You need the parents to help in the schools. You want the involvement also; you want them to be aware of what's happening in the schools. Then you want to teach the children and you want, hopefully, that the children can then take it back in the home to teach their parents. So, if you have a parent in there and her child's there too, then it's almost guaranteed that they will take it back to the home. But where there are no parents and we're coming in with that experiment, it's very hard to get it back into the homes. That's essentially what we're trying to do, to bring what we teach into a natural part of the home activity.

I feel that at this point, if we don't have parent involvement or community involvement and we're teaching the children, then the children are going to have to become our teachers, because they're going to know more than their parents and then, if that can happen, it'd be a wonderful thing.

But that may just be theoretical. It may just be sort of an idea that sounds good on paper. But if that happens, then we can really begin to really operate effectively.

Nathan: In any of these classes, did the fathers ever participate, or did they go to the schools?

Asawa: Some did.

Nathan: Have they shown any interest in the activities in the school more recently? I was thinking of some of the things that you've been doing in the schools in the last few years. Have there been very many fathers who've showed any interest?

Asawa: Yes. When we were building planters, we had a father build the planters for us. They've also done tree planting with us. Lew Litsky has been involved in sort of the organization of our program, I mean, the accounting and working in an area in which he can help the program, so that we've had that kind of help too.

Nathan: When you're working in the schools with the children, do boys and girls participate equally?

Asawa: They all want it. They all want it!

Nathan: You don't have to persuade the children.

Asawa: It's only a rare case when a child refuses to get dirty. I mean, they'll say that they'd get punished at home if they get paint on their clothes, so I don't know how many beatings we have--[laughter].

Neighborhood Focus and Moving On

Nathan: When you started in the Alvarado School, did you have any special feeling that you should work in your own neighborhood first?

Asawa: Yes, absolutely. The thing that is interesting about this neighborhood is that we have a working nursery school. We're all split up now, but when we began, it was before busing was here. The thing was to have a working nursery school and then have a school that these children could go to. This is theory. Theoretically, the ideal thing is if you can make it actually work, then you'd have something really nice going on.

We had an active Neighborhood Tree Planting, the improvement with trees, so that our neighborhood, Noe Valley, has had the largest community-planned tree planting in the city. We must have had at least 300 or 400 people, owners, participating in this program.

Nathan: Did that program start here, or was it a city program?

Asawa: Well, the city began a tree planting program about five or six years ago, maybe earlier, where if a neighborhood gets ten signatures, then the city comes out and cuts the holes.

Nathan: Along a parking strip?

Asawa: No, along the sidewalk, all along the sidewalk. So, we had one man, Earl Moss, who has taken that as his interest, and he goes around to every neighbor, to the grocery store. Everywhere he hands out this application for tree planting. When he gets ten in a block, then he calls Department of Public Works, Tree Planting Department, Brian Fewer, and they come out and they cut a hole. Sometimes some blocks have a tree planting party. In Berkeley, you're full of trees, so it's old hat to you. But here in the city--

Nathan: Oh, it's very important.

Asawa: And that has sort of brought us together. Then, the people who live here have decided that they would like to run a little shop on 24th Street, so that they would rather live and work in their neighborhood. So, we have a book store called Books Plus, which is run by two who live in this neighborhood, two young men who run it, and they're active with the nursery school and the wives are active in the school. So, it's a really very happy thing.

Then, the group fought for down-zoning, so that they wouldn't have apartments here. They're really very concerned in a local way with how their neighborhood is operating. I think that's really a

Asawa: healthy thing that's happening in the city and I feel that our school program contributes to that kind of solidarity. The first two or three years, people were trying to move to this neighborhood so that they would be near the school, which was an interesting thing. We got quite a few people moving into this neighborhood because of the school.

Then, of course, with busing, that was sort of very upsetting. But we said that it was our responsibility to go.

Sharing

Nathan: To accept the new children?

Asawa: No, to go and move and start new programs. That's how we started in Chinatown and, you know, the Zellerbach Family Fund supported that whole mural project there, which was filmed by BBC.

Nathan: No, I didn't realize that.

Asawa: They opened the storeroom with the supplies; they shared things. In that school now, with ESEA and ESAA, they're combining back-to-back programs, so that we're not in isolation. They need an ethnic program, so that they have it scheduled for Chinese New Year's, Black Week, and then they bring our program into kite-making, you know, and then with the Blacks they make masks. So, they're bringing to share what they each have and bring them into a common kind of curriculum, which is done by our parents, so that they get the most for their money.

I think that, hopefully, that begins to happen with our program and federal programs and reading programs and math programs, so that if they need the reading and math complemented, then we can complement it with enrichment and bring it together. If that can happen, then it will be the most efficient use of both groups' money and, hopefully, that will happen. That can only happen if people are generous enough to share what they have. We have always offered our program to the gifted program, the ESEA program. We say that we should combine our resources, and then they start talking about guidelines; they can't do this and this, you know. They're just sort of depriving themselves; they have programs like a one-to-one--

Nathan: This is in the Chinatown school?

Asawa: In general. They have these programs where they have tutorials where they reach one child, not the rest. Our program reaches every child, you know, and we try to reach every child. We don't

Asawa: reach the whole school, but we don't pull the gifted and the special children out. We take the whole group and we don't discriminate and say, "You're dumb," or, "You're Okay."

Nathan: It's interesting that when some of your parents, who have a very happy neighborhood situation here, were spread out by the schools, they didn't just get lost, but they did seem able to carry the message with them.

Asawa: Well, our program survived and we went to Hunters Point, Potrero Hill, and Chinatown. The teachers at Hunters Point said, "This is the first program for children in the area of the arts."

Nathan: Is that right?

Asawa: They were heavily funded for reading and math. So, if you were creative, you would have quickly seen how you could have reading, math, art all lumped into one thing, like you could have had your books published with the writing in it, illustrations, so that they would have the art and they would have the whole experience of a whole project. This is what we're trying to offer them now, that they can take the math component, they can take the multi-ethnic component, they can take English or reading, and put it all together into something that is very concrete.

Nathan: Do you attempt to put together a text of any kind?

Asawa: Well, I don't really know whether that's the solution.

Nathan: No, I don't know whether it is either. I gather this is not your idea of what they need?

Asawa: I think that there may be great profit in it. I can see that everybody will grab for such a thing, but I don't think that that is the solution any more than I believe that the tape cassettes--you know, the video-taping thing--is going to answer the problem, or that TV's going to answer it, or film strips.

Nathan: You think those are just all techniques?

Techniques: The Real Thing and Counseling

Asawa: They are all techniques and they are all used by the teacher as a substitute for the real thing.

Nathan: And the real thing is--?

Asawa: The real thing is being in contact with the real, warm body of somebody who's doing it. People say, "Well, we can't afford to have that many people." In the meantime, they spend on evaluation, they spend on counseling, they spend on all that is absolutely useless. It really is useless because the counseling is wrong. I mean, the kind of counseling that they give is wrong. [Brief interruption]

Nathan: So, you think, just briefly, about the counseling that it is not sufficiently related again to the real world?

Asawa: Well, I just say from our own experience with our own children. For example, when our daughter was graduating from junior high school, she had a chance to go to either Mission or to Lowell. So, the counselor said to her, "If I were you, I would go to Mission because Lowell is too tough and Mission is lower, academically less, so your grades will be so spectacular that you could probably get into Cal easier than if you went to Lowell, because at Lowell you might be a "C" student." Can you imagine that kind of counseling?

Nathan: That is cynical, isn't it?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Where did she go finally?

Asawa: Lowell. Now she says she wishes she'd gone to Mission.

Nathan: [Laughter] Of course!

Asawa: But it's interesting, the kind of counseling that is given to children. If instead of eight counselors, you would have eight practicing artists, you'd just change the whole environment of a school. I think people are shoved into jobs in the school system that are counter-productive and a lot of counselors know that they're not doing any good and they're frustrated, but they're assigned that, so they take that. It's really too bad, as much for them as for the students.

Or, a minor in art is put into a teaching job for art, or a P.E. major has to teach art because she has an art minor and the school needs an art teacher. All these things. They could make it work within what they have if they would utilize the skills that are within that framework of the faculty. There are plenty of teachers that are really very talented, but they're not used in the right way.

Nathan: I supposed there would be the problem of what you do with all the counselors then, because you can't just make someone into an artist.

Asawa: No, I'm saying that all of them originally began as teachers.

Nathan: As teachers, I see. And that's what they ought to be?

Asawa: And I think that everyone should be in the teaching field. I think everyone should be in the classroom.

Nathan: Everyone should teach?

Asawa: Everyone should teach, yes. You can have a smaller classroom size by the number of adults you have in the school.

Nathan: You were saying a little earlier something about programs in which older children--let's say, high school children--teach the younger ones. Does this operate in the art field also?

Asawa: Well, I don't think this happens yet. I think people think of tutorials, tutors in math, tutors in English, tutors in writing or reading, in those areas. But I don't see anything yet in the area of the arts, except that it actually is happening at Mission High School, where they have the Mission Mime Troupe. These are students that are being taught. It was taught by a State College student teacher last year and he's now part of the Lone Mountain program.

These students develop a whole company. Last year, they came to Alvarado and performed every Tuesday in the spring. Right now they are coming once a week until the end of the year. They come as part of their school curriculum to do this.

Our son is in junior high school and he has a Groucho Marx routine with about three or four of his friends. This is independent. Now, if this little group could go on a little mini-tour around the neighborhood elementary schools and put this on, or if the junior high drama department, or the English teacher who's putting a production together, could then take this with the idea that she would gear this whole semester's work around a tour around the city--just even if they did three or four performances, like Diamond Heights, Alvarado, Edison, Kate Kennedy, all of these neighboring schools--then the children who are going to these schools, which are feeder schools to the junior high, could begin to see what junior high school is all about, that it is not a great mystery, that they can look forward to this thing. It could happen in puppetry. That way, it could make the activities that are done at the high school and junior high level have some meaning.

The MADDS Festival and Involving Departments

Nathan: Yes, instead of just having a performance in your own auditorium?

Asawa: And then your parents come and maybe you have an audience of 26 or 27 people, of interested parents, and you've worked the whole semester for it. I've seen this happen year after year. Why they don't really do something with it.

Hopefully, the festival that we'll have in the spring, the MADDS Festival--

Nathan: MADDS? That's an acronym, I take it.

Asawa: That's Music, Art, Dance, Drama, Science. They've changed it now to add home-making, so that they've renamed it. But I think that that probably will stick because it's the original name.

Nathan: This festival takes in the various schools?

Asawa: It's open to all public and private and parochial schools in the city, with the Exploratorium, the San Francisco Museum, the De Young Museum. Parks and Recreation [Department] cooperating with the San Francisco Art Commission and the Art Department of the San Francisco Unified School District. We're going to try to get the Arboretum and the Academy of Sciences to participate in it. You know, the Academy of Sciences has a science fair and the Art Department has an art fair. But, hopefully, this will make it so that they bring it together, so it's not art here and science there and the home-making separately.

Nathan: Will it go, say, for a weekend?

Asawa: It will be May 9, 10, 11, and 12. That will be Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday; two school days and two weekend days. That will coincide with the PTA Conference right there at Civic Auditorium, so it will be a perfect kind of stage for all the PTA members in California. I think it's a conference for California. It may be national; I'm not sure.

But this is the idea of bringing all departments of the city together. The Art Commission Neighborhood Arts Program will be active in it. Levi Strauss is going to put up the panels that were painted around the construction there at Embarcadero Center. And then the Bank of America has offered--I mean, they're negotiating now on having a show of the winners from this festival.

Nathan: You've been, I gather, very instrumental in getting this festival set up.

Asawa: That was one of the other things that I thought the Art Commission should have. In 1969, we talked about doing this through the Neighborhood Arts Program, as sponsors of the thing, and at that time we couldn't do it. But this has always been the idea, that we'd get the city agencies together and we'd get the school district together and do something together. Hopefully, we'd get the police department to patrol it and the Muni to offer buses to the schools to bring the orchestra, the band, or the gym equipment. So, this would be an efficient way to see what is happening in a positive way in our schools, instead of reports and studies and this and that, to have four days of people coming from all over the city to see. Kids can see what other schools are doing. Parents can see what's happening here and say, "We want that. We should have that. Sure. Why not us? Why can't we have that? Why does that school have that?"

We'd lay it out there and those who are doing something could show what's happening. What we'd like to do with the Alvarado group would be to have all the artists who are working in our program do workshops there, so that parents and teachers and children can participate in some of the activities.

Nathan: About how many artists are there now in the Alvarado program would you say?

Asawa: Oh, gee, a lot. Maybe 25.

Nathan: That many?

Asawa: These are all part-time, all just here and there, workshops here and there. One of the things that's interesting about, for example, Mission, which I've been sort of indirectly involved in, is that the San Francisco Museum now is involved. They gave money to set up a gallery, so we have a student gallery in the school.

Nathan: Now, Mission is not going to be demolished?

Asawa: No. Mission is at Poly now. So, they have a gallery which will exhibit students' work there.

Nathan: A student gallery. That's really very exciting.

MADDS Reviewed*

Nathan: I'd like to go back a little. If you don't feel like talking about it, we can do it another time or perhaps not. We're talking now some time after this festival in May, the Music, Art, Dance, Drama, Science Festival. Were you involved in that planning?

*This portion was inserted from a subsequent interview.

Asawa: Yes. Well, Joan Abrahamson was in charge of bringing it all together. She directed the whole thing and the School Department had Junius Camp representing the school and Herb Simon, the art director. P.E. took care of gymnastics and tumbling, and Dan Ryan, and Mr. Bezeman organized music--you know, the bands and the choir, and someone took care of the programming. We asked Levi Strauss in the Embarcadero Center to loan us the panels that we had painted two years ago. They were now down because of the building being completed, so they loaned us the panels and Levi Strauss paid for the installation. We had asked if they would give us some of the panels and they may give us these panels for future use. So, we're going to use them at Ft. Mason for the Fourth of July festival. That's coming up July 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th at Ft. Mason.

Nathan: This Ft. Mason Fourth of July festival--that would be temporary?

Asawa: Yes. We're not going to do anything, but they're using the panels. They're storing the panels. They're using them there.

Nathan: Oh, I see. So, that's another use of the panels. Did you say this MADDS Festival was not the first one?

Asawa: This was the second one. Last year it was financed by the Neighborhood Arts Program and they had Kathy Oliva, who did what Joan did this year, with Junius Camp and several of the departments. This year we tried to expand it to all the departments. We invited all the departments.

Nathan: How do you feel it went? What is your assessment of it?

Asawa: Oh, it went very well. Saturday and Sunday we didn't have much of a crowd. Thursday and Friday it was mobbed. Saturday we had a demonstration by the Nazi Party on one side. The Jewish--I don't know what they're called--the Liberation, or the Jewish Military--but they were protesting the Nazis. That was going on and we were parading around with a dragon and the music was at the other end on Larkin Street. It was a surreal scene.

Nathan: [Laughter] It must have been!

Asawa: But I think it was very good and next year we'll probably do it during the school year in a school week so more children could come to it.

Nathan: Now, that was at the--

Asawa: The Civic Center.

Nathan: And it may be that that isn't a place people necessarily go on weekends usually, is it?

Asawa: No. So, what we want to do is really to have it right there down in the center of town near the Board of Education, near the city hall, so that it reminds them that that's what they're in business for.

It's turned a lot of teachers on and a lot of parents.

Movable Plays and Repeat Performances

Asawa: There's one teacher who said that she'd found five ideas that she'd like to take back for next year. So, it sounds like an in-service.

The important thing, I think, is for other children to see very skilled children in acrobatics and dance and music so that they have an opportunity to see one another. It's not a good place for theater because it's just too open, but if there were some way in which they could also have theater performances somewhere similar to that, so that there would be a film and theater festival somewhere, then there would be a better exchange of effort.

Nathan: Right. Now, you're talking in terms of a festival, I gather, in one place. But I suppose really it would be possible to simply visit other schools and put on these performances to a broader audience.

Asawa: Yes. Or the other thing to do would be to do plays that are movable, so that a school can travel from Lincoln to Washington High, or to Mission, so that there would be some way in which they could even travel around. But I think it has to be much more organized so that the awareness becomes really a conscious thing for the schools and the students.

Nathan: Right. You mentioned sort of in passing that the first MADDS Festival had been financed by Neighborhood Arts. How was this one financed, the second one?

Asawa: This was partly by our program, partly by the California Arts Commission, our funds from that. By providing the opportunity to these schools to have some of it, they also had something to bring to the festival, and in that way you make your money double. You serve two purposes. You provide a program in a school and they in turn bring it there and then you're doing two things with the same money.

The school gave us buses. They provided buses; they did not provide money. But, on the other hand, our program being funded by the Board of Education, in a sense, is putting money through our program. But the operational costs, we took care of that in the Alvarado program.

Nathan: And as far as you can judge, this may be the same system that will work for the next festival?

Asawa: Well, no. We're hoping that there will be more commitment from the Board next year, just in the mechanics of guards, of whatever needs to be done--you see, the sign system was provided by the Neighborhood Arts Program. The set-up was provided by the Neighborhood Arts. All the panels belong to the Art Commission. So, this in a way was a cooperative effort. Then the Park Commission gave us use of the park. We didn't get the police to cooperate by giving us some patrol, night service. But then Levi Strauss provided us with the panels and the labor to put them up. We primed them and we got them cleaned up ourselves; we had a crew to clean up. Then the Bank of America gave space in their concourse gallery for pieces from that show. Of course, Joan Abrahamson took care of all of that. So, in a way, we reached out into the community, into the business community, and I think more and more of this has to happen.

Nathan: Can you see other people, other parents or other artists, who are going to be able to do this kind of pulling together, this sort of cooperative effort? Are you trying to cultivate other people to do this also?

Asawa: Well, I would love to. I think somebody has to do it. Somebody should be there. Of course, Joan is just a genius at making these contacts and having that kind of background that she has, coupled with her energy to do such a thing, she's pulled a lot of things together--a Bi-Centennial thing.

Nathan: Oh, really? I should ask about that next time, the Bi-Centennial plan.

Asawa: Yes.

VI PLAY-DOUGH

Workshop in Hawaii

Nathan: You were saying that you had been giving a play-dough workshop in Hawaii?

Asawa: Yes. There's a young couple, an Episcopal minister and his wife. They wanted to do something and they did this whole project on their own. They sent us a plane ticket to go. I was going with a friend of mine, Mae Lee, who is a mutual friend of the Pummel's, Joseph and Phoebe Pummel, and a wedding came up, so my daughter Aiko went in her place. So, her husband and she and I went and did six workshops on three sites. One was at a school, Hawaii Girls School. The second one was at St. Andrew's Cathedral and the other was at St. Christopher's in Kailua. That's on the other side of the island of Oahu from Honolulu.

They had no idea really of what to expect or of what kind of response they would get. So, the first day we had about 75 people in the morning and about 45 in the afternoon. Then the second day we had 160 and so on, until when we were through we had 600 in the three days.

Nathan: Who were these people?

Asawa: They were just mothers, children, teachers, a lot of teachers wanting to do something. We had a school for the handicapped that came. That class came and there were some children from Iolani School, which is a private school there, and these were preschoolers. Their teachers and parents came. So, either you paid a fee or you brought a five-pound sack of flour and a pound of salt. So, they had a lot.

They were expecting, well, maybe if they got 50 pounds of flour, and they already had 20 pounds at home, that they could pick up another ten pounds if somebody would bring some. But they didn't realize that that much flour would be used. So, it was really a success.

Nathan: How did they announce the fact that you were going to be there?

Asawa: Well, they sent out notices. They sent out a mimeographed sheet. Then two newspapers covered it and two television stations covered it. It was because of the media that the second and third day were so packed. They had read about it and so they drove and brought their children. The place was mobbed.

Nathan: That must have been fun.

The Dough-In

Asawa: Oh, it was wonderful, yes. And then, just a sidelight, I think it's the Hawaiian National Bank or something--a man came and asked if we would do a sculpture in pennies to try to encourage people to stop hoarding pennies and bring them back into circulation.

Nathan: A sculpture in pennies?

Asawa: Yes. So, I asked them to come the next day in the afternoon and in the meantime somebody suggested--I think the minister's wife suggested--that we make a penny in play-dough. So, we made a penny about ten inches in diameter and I made the Lincoln side and Aiko made the tail side of the penny. We thought that that would be a nice gimmick to stimulate them and he wanted to connect it with the "Dough-In" project. They labeled it the "Dough-In."

So, it is very interesting because I think we had a lot of people. We had craftsmen come, some from the university.

There's one thing not connected to this, that Hawaii is trying out this year. They have a state mandatory law that requires one percent of the cost of every building to be put into art commissions.

Nathan: Is this for a public building?

Asawa: Yes. State buildings. What they are trying to do this year, as I understand it, is that they are going to have an Artist in the Schools program from the Endowment this year.

Nathan: The National Endowment?

Asawa: The National Endowment. And what the state is going to do is it's going to back-to-back its one percent commission program with the Endowment, so that they will try this on the island of Hawaii, I think, and the artists are being called back. Most of them are natives who have left the islands and who live on the mainland and

Asawa: they are calling them back to work as artists in the schools with a commission so that they can be working on their commission at the same time that they're working with an Artist in the Schools program. It sounds very interesting.

Nathan: So, the actual projects that the artists in the schools will work on will be--

Asawa: Their own work.

Nathan: Their own work for these public buildings?

Asawa: Yes. And then they also spend some time with the students. I think primarily they're not to be teachers, but to be working as artists.

Nathan: And will the students participate as one does sort of in an atelier? Will they have something to do with the work, do you think?

Asawa: That really is going to be up to the artist, but the requirement is that they do it on the school site, I think, or a place that is adjacent so that there will be some relationship with the school.

Nathan: How does this compare with what I understand is supposed to happen in San Francisco, that a one or two percent sum of the cost of every public building is supposed to be set aside for art?

Asawa: Well, we have two percent in San Francisco.

Nathan: And this is a San Francisco ruling, is it?

Asawa: It's not mandatory, but they can use it. That's why it's up really to my committee to go after it. Each time a building appears on the agenda, then we have to go and ask the city to consider it. So far they have never turned us down.

Nathan: I don't want to lose that point, but I'd like to ask you one more thing about the "Dough-In," if I may. How do you demonstrate or how do you set up this kind of a teaching arrangement?

Asawa: Well, the way we did it there was that the tables were arranged with about ten to a table and I think that we had enough tables set up for about 150 to work. The first time we had 10 or 11 tables, which meant that we could accommodate 100 at tables and if there was an overflow they could sit around on the floor. Then we had large mixing bowls and large measuring cups. We had a four-cup measuring cup and then we had eight-cup pitchers--you know, those plastic pitchers for fruit juice--and then we had one-cup measuring cups for the salt. Then we tried to keep the cups separate for the flour. We don't use it for water too; we keep a dry cup and a wet cup. And we had buckets there. We asked some of the parents to bring bowls with them, those who wanted to learn.

Asawa: So, we began by mixing and we started. We would mix the plain dough without the color first.

4 Cups of Flour, 1 Cup of Salt, 1 1/2 Cups of Water

Nathan: And what is the formula? How much flour?

Asawa: Four cups of flour, one cup of salt, one and a half cups of water. And if you want to add a color in it, you use dry tempera, which you mix in with the dry mix first, about two tablespoons of color. You can buy that in a one-pound container, like a one-pound salt container, at any art supply. But if you are working with children, or with anybody, you should be very careful that you don't use anything that is toxic pigment. These are always nontoxic.

Then the flour and salt and the powder pigment are mixed thoroughly and then the water is added to it. One and a half cups of water are added to that all at once and then you mix the whole thing. It is really gooey at first and then you keep pulling in the dry flour mix down at the bottom of the bowl.

Nathan: Do you do this with your hands?

Asawa: You do it with your hands and then gradually it will all sort of begin to stick together and the consistency is like bread dough. Then it is turned over and is put on a table to knead and you knead it for three to five minutes until it's smooth.

The parents were watching and then we'd say, "Okay, you try it." So, they'd come in. Some would add too much water, some would make it too dry, and then what we would do is we'd show them how it should feel. We had a finished batch there so that they could feel it, so that they could compare their dough with the good one.

Then we finally got it organized on the third day so that the dough was always kept on one table. All the mixed colors were on one table and then each table was given a lump maybe the size of a small baseball or a tennis ball, about that much on each table. All the colors were put out in the center of the tables so that each person didn't get a little bit, because when you do it that way it dries out. So, it's better to leave it in as large a chunk as possible so that the air doesn't dry it out and then you take whatever color. As soon as you run out of a color, then you go and get some more. By doing that there was less waste and the dough was workable for a longer time.

Asawa: And then we had seeds. We had popcorn, black-eyed peas, peas, mung beans, kidney beans, sunflower seeds. And we had macaroni, you know, the shell macaroni, the little macaroni salad, those little circles, that were used and that we brought in. Then we cut up Olympia beer cans in one-inch strips and then cut those into little pieces, so that we had little pieces like half-inch by one-inch. Those were used to make patterns with, where you would make a curved pattern or a V pattern. You would just use those for texture or for cutting, for cutting the dough so that we wouldn't have a lot of knives on the table. It was primarily to show them what they could do with their throw-away materials.

We also then took the pull tops off of the beer cans and the soft drinks and had them save those so that they could use those to insert into the dough after they were finished with their figures that would be baked in an oven. There it takes longer to bake because of the moisture in the air, but those were baked into them so that if they wanted to hang it on a wall it would hang on a wall. They could hang it so there would be no problem with that.

We did it at low temperature because what you're trying to do really there is to dry out the dough, to take all of the water out of the dough instead of baking it; because you've used food coloring and when you bake it at high temperature you lose all your color. So, the idea there is not to bake it at a high temperature, but to bake it as low as you can--like from 250 to 300 degrees--and then you bake it for a long time. Sometimes you bake it all night or two or three hours after that.

But if you're baking dough that is not colored and you want that nice brown color, then you bake it from 300 to 350 degrees, depending on how dark you want it to get that brown look. That would take anywhere from an hour or an hour and a half and if you want it darker you just keep it in there until you get the brown color that you want. See, like one there [points to baked clay plaque]. That's a natural one.

Nathan: I see. There's not a glaze on it. That's its own color.

Asawa: That's its own color, but after it's done, in order to protect it from the moisture in the air, you have to put a coat of verathane or a polyester resin on the thing and spraying it is not enough. It should actually be brushed on or dipped in the solution of clear varnish or clear plastic. That way it will seal the moisture out of it--I mean, keep the moisture from being absorbed.

Nathan: We're looking at a plaque of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Was this something you did some time ago?

Asawa: Well, that was one of the very earliest ones. In the early '60s, I think, I did that.

Nathan: He's even got the apple in his hand. He's taking a bite.

Asawa: About to eat, yes.

Nathan: [Laughter] That's a very crucial moment.

Asawa: Yes. We're all suffering from it. [Laughter]

Nathan: They look like such nice people too. [Laughter]

Asawa: Well, we're all nice people, still struggling with the same problem.

"Let's Work on a Story"

Asawa: So, what we did was then we went and got some fruit crates from the grocery store and wherever there was a group of children from a school we gave them a box and we said, "Let's work on a story," so that the things that they did were not isolated, but we created a story. While we were there we talked about, "Now, we're going to do this," and then we'd say, "Oh, hm, I think we--," you know. Somebody would have made a little fish and we'd say, "Oh, let's make a little lake." So, we'd make a little lake and then we'd put all the fish in there and everyone who did a fish would put it in that lake. This was a class of severely handicapped children who came and they weren't quite sure what to do with this. So, the minute we got a piece of cardboard, that scrap cardboard that we were cutting up--there is a circle, you know, sometimes in a fruit basket, in one of these bushel baskets. There is a circle at the bottom or at the top. We took that and used that as a frame and then we began to glue things on it and by the end of two hours, they had built a beautiful little picture that every one of those students worked on. So, they took that back and they will hang it at their school. So, it just sort of gave them an idea of how they could actually go beyond just making those things, so that they could extend it into the classroom and do any number of stories through dough while they were learning the technique of using it.

So, actually, I didn't really demonstrate anything. I just simply suggested things and then they carried it out. And each child and each parent made something and explored it.

Nathan: And then did they take it home and do the baking themselves?

Asawa: They took it home to bake, yes.

At the County Fair, 1969

Nathan: Have you done this sort of thing in other places, at fairs and at other places?

Asawa: The first time I did it was at the County Fair in 1969, at the Los Angeles County Fair. We worked for 17 days and we worked every day from ten 'til ten, from ten to eleven on the weekends, demonstrating. When we were through, we had all the letters of "Los Angeles County Fair." Each panel was a letter, so we made L-O-S A-N-G-E-L-E-S and so on. The theme was everything that was at the Fair, so one took the livestock, and one the circus, and another the racetrack, and so on, and then the foods, the canned foods, and the fruit exhibit. So, that was the first time.

You know, the panels that I had at my exhibit last year were from seven different schools, seven or eight schools, where I did the same thing.

Nathan: I see. When you were demonstrating at the Fair, would people stand around and watch? But they wouldn't do it at that time?

Asawa: They didn't do it at that time. They did some at the very beginning, but it got so confusing. There were too many people and we didn't have enough material there, so we ended up demonstrating and working on the panels. We invited a few to come and put something on at that time and then we baked them at the Fair, so that each day we were on another letter, so that people came back several times to see our progress. They would be watching and they would say, "We were there when they were working on the 'O,'" and we'd be on the "G" somewhere, you know. So, we had people coming back several times. And then the Fair people, the people who were working at the Fair, would come to see if their section was going to be represented.

Nathan: How large were the panels at the Fair?

Asawa: At the Fair they were big enough to fit into the oven. That was our limit. So, they were about 16 by 16, or 14 by 14, whatever the size of the oven was.

Letters to the Artist: The Mermaid Fountain

Nathan: Do people correspond with you after you have done things like this?

Asawa: Oh, yes. I get a lot of letters.

Nathan: How can you handle all that correspondence?



1968

Ghirardelli Fountain, Ghirardelli Square, San Francisco

*Photograph by Laurence J. Cuneo, Jr.
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Asawa: Some of them you don't need to answer. I mean, you know, it's not like the movie stars. I don't need a secretary. I got several dozen, maybe a hundred letters.

Nathan: That seems like a lot to me.

Asawa: I did get from the exhibit last year nice letters. I got a stack of letters when the Mermaid Fountain went in.

Nathan: Oh, did you? What sort of people wrote to you?

Asawa: Oh, a lot of women wrote to me. Some wrote me long letters on the meaning of the circle and about mythology and about motherhood and the significance or the symbolism of the mermaid and the frogs and the turtles. They went into all kinds of things. I don't remember them any more. But I got only one negative letter from a college professor. [Laughter] But I really got it just sort of from very plain folk.

Nathan: Do you keep these letters?

Asawa: I have all of them somewhere, yes.

Nathan: That would be fascinating.

Asawa: I've thought of putting a book together on drawings that a junior high school class did. They went and they sketched the fountain with their teacher. His name is Rob McConnell. He was a junior high teacher at Horace Mann. He now teaches at Galileo. What was interesting about that was that the students made a drawing, an ink drawing, and then they wrote about the fountain whatever they wanted to write. In several instances the handwriting was illegible--you know, bad spelling and print--but the drawing was very accurate. I mean, the perspective and the brick detail around there. So, it really demonstrates that it's wrong that we grade students just on handwritten material because there are some who can't write, but they can draw. This indicates that when they're graded on only one thing and they fail simply because they have misspelled and written so badly, I think it's a mistake. I think that that's why art is such an essential part of understanding an individual, not just for self-expression and all of that that people go into now, but that it also is a part of the development of a person. So, I think it's as essential.

Now, let's see. What were we talking about? Back to Hawaii, we cut up cardboard and then gave each person a paper towel to work on so that it wouldn't stick to the table or to the cardboard. Then we had the instruction on each table. Then they took it on; they were just happy. Families came.

Nathan: That's what you've always believed in anyway, that the families do things together.

Asawa: Yes. So, it was really very nice.

Properties of Clay and Dough

Nathan: Did you walk around among the tables and see what people were doing?

Asawa: Oh, yes. And then they'd say, "Can you help me with this?" Then I would say, "Sure," and then I would suggest that they could use certain tools that looked like nothing. They thought, "Well, maybe you just stick it in." I used it to make textures. And then a lot of them came because they were interested and they'd work in clay, but couldn't seem to get the thing--it's quite different.

You have to learn its properties, you know, that it doesn't stand up vertically. If you want to make a standing figure, you have to make it in the same way that you would draw it on a piece of paper. You'd have to draw it flat. So, instead of putting legs up this way [gestures], you'd have to put legs down here [horizontally] and then the dress and then the head this way [gestures] instead of trying to make it like clay because it would just collapse. That's sort of the difference between clay and dough.

Nathan: And in dough can you not make a sharp edge?

Asawa: Oh, yes. You can make a sharp edge. You can cut. You can do anything with it. You don't have to stick it down the way you do with clay. Clay--you have to score it and you have to wet it and then press it down and then pinch it on so that you make sure that all the arms and legs will stick when it dries, whereas with dough all you have to do is lick it or put a little water with a brush and then in the baking it all sticks together. So, it's better to bake it than to just air dry it because all those joints will probably fall off if they're air dried.

Nathan: Did you assemble all of the equipment, all of the pieces of cardboard and the paper towels and pieces of tin can?

Asawa: No. Well, we saved cans and we cut them before. You see, I went one weekend before, so I gathered seed pods along the road and got the beer cans and the pull tops. Then the school had towels, so we asked them for towels. We brought some bowls into the kitchen. They had bowls in the kitchen, so we used their bowls. So, it was pretty easy. It wasn't too complicated. And we also supplied the dry tempera, the paints; we got them. We used both wet and dry

Asawa: pigments. The poster paint is already mixed and it's not as good as the dry because it somehow makes the dough a little gummier, but if you don't have the other you can use it.

Then after the whole project was over or a table was through, then we gathered all the little bits and pieces and put it all together into a ball so that we had a multicolored batch. With that we made butterflies, fish, sort of tropical fish, and sort of fantastic. They were beautiful. They looked just like the goldfish and, you know, there's a variety of colors. And at the airport there are fish that big, about that big--gold, black, orange, white, purple, blue, all the colors--so that now they can look at the fish and just see that they're made from dough.

Nathan: If you're working with some dough and it starts to dry out, can you bring it back?

Asawa: Well, the best way to do it would be to wet your hands, just use that much water, and then knead it into the dough and it will come back. The best thing is to keep your dough in the plastic bags.

Nathan: You can make it ahead of time?

Asawa: Well, not much ahead. You should make it in the morning you're going to work and not make the afternoon batch until after lunch, so that you make a fresh batch each time. If you try to keep it over night, it gets very sticky and gummy and it may be that the salt is breaking down and becoming liquefied. So, it's better just to make what you're going to use. If you're working with little children, if you were making tiny figures, it would be six or eight children who could get something out of that--you know, a figure each.

Nathan: Out of one batch, yes, I see. I was thinking too back to some of the letters that you received. I don't know whether it's necessary to keep them all, but certainly some of them would be very interesting just to deposit along with this memoir because it would explain the meaning that some of your work has for individuals.

Asawa: That's an idea, yes. We were at the fountain in Ghirardelli Square one day, and I was being interviewed. There was a group of women. There was one woman who came up to me and said that all her life, when she was a child and her parents took her camping, she'd always sit by a stream because she was hoping that she would see a mermaid come out because she knew that there were stories about mermaids. So, she said now she is so happy that there's one here because it is her dream come true. She said that she had organized a group of women and she said that they would make a ring around the fountain so that no one could remove it. [Chuckle] So, anyway, that was very nice.

Nathan: That's very protective.

Asawa: I think she was from Spain or South America.

VII SERVING ON ART COMMISSIONS

The Nebraska Art Council Idea

Nathan: With all of this going on, I can see that part of your problem is in determining how much private commissioned work you can do.

Asawa: I can't really do much. If I were talking, I would talk to a group of teachers or supervisors or something. I've done that this year. I have about three commissions now that I've been committed to do.

Nathan: Do you have a deadline on them?

Asawa: Well, one sort of has a deadline. The Nebraska State Art Council asked for their Bi-Centennial. I turned that down, but I did offer names from the Art Commission as potential people to participate in that because I think that that could be a very interesting thing for artists.

Nathan: Their plan was to commission various artists to produce things?

Asawa: Produce things for the state. You see, they had the whole state of Nebraska and they had these things on a map and they would show, on this main highway (I think it is Interstate 80), stopping places for people going cross-country. They would like major pieces in about 10 or 12 places.

Nathan: What a fascinating idea!

Asawa: Isn't that exciting? If I weren't involved in this program, I would just--I mean, I wouldn't necessarily be chosen. They're selecting people now to go in. But I would certainly like to do such a thing as that.

Nathan: Yes! These are not all necessarily sculptures?

Asawa: They will all have to be outdoor pieces, yes. It could be a mosaic, anything that has to be very permanent.

Nathan: Because it gets very snowy and cold, doesn't it?

Asawa: Yes.

S.F. Art Commission and BART Council

Asawa: So, I think that I'm probably over-committed on being on the Art Commission, the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit District) Council--

Nathan: The BART Council?

Asawa: I'm on the BART Council. That's to select art for the BART stations. Of course, at this point, there's no money yet, but that's something for the future. So, there's not that much work; there's not any work in it. There's not really very much work in the Art Commission or any of these things, except that your mind is on it, meaning that you have to be there, or knowing that you're going to have a special meeting on the U.N. Fountain or whatever we're involved in.

I think we do have a good Art Commission now. There are active members who are very good. We're not represented by dance, which I think we should be, performing arts. The theater is not represented and that should be really something that the supervisors should just do on their own. They shouldn't have to be asked that. They should offer that. You know, that's the trouble with the government. They never lead anything; they only react to pressure. And that's why as soon as our program begins to do that, I don't think that our program will be effective at all. We're always offering this and that.

Nathan: The initiative has to come from you.

Asawa: Yes, yes. I think that that's really important.

Nathan: Does the mayor name people to the Art Commission?

Asawa: Yes. But there has to be a change in the charter to add the dance and theater people onto the Commission. We need to become an Arts Commission, an Arts Commission, you know?

Nathan: Right.

Asawa: Because I think that that's going to be very important.

Advisory Panel, California Arts Commission

Nathan: You're also on an advisory board to the California Arts Commission.

Asawa: Yes, I am one of the panelists. I think that what they're going to do with that is that they're going to--nothing is really formulated now. We'll have a meeting in April to make those decisions or hear what they're going to do.

My suggestion was that maybe a certain number of the panelists be new and some stay on, so that there's an overlap like this [gestures], as we do on the San Francisco Art Commission. So, I don't know what they will do. That was my suggestion, that maybe two-thirds stay on and they get a new third for this coming year. Then they'd have reviews every three or four months, for applicants.

Nathan: Do applicants for State Arts Commission grants come in all year long?

Asawa: That's what they're going to do. That's what they're planning. This is a sort of suggestion. I don't know what decisions they will make yet. But we suggested that they have like what the Oakland Museum or the San Francisco Museum or De Young Museum have, sort of a clinic, so that people who are not organized, like small theater groups or small neighborhood people who are not into the whole business of it--would have a place maybe once a month, or the first Friday of every month, where they can come for advice.

Nathan: On how to make a proposal?

Asawa: On how to make a proposal and what they need, what the requirements are, you know, all of that. These would be announced, so that small groups who might be kind of timid about doing it would have a place to go. They're meeting now, you know. They're meeting downtown at Golden Gate Avenue.

Nathan: Who is?

Asawa: The State Arts Commission is having a hearing today.

Nathan: What is it doing?

Asawa: It's to make a report. James Forward, I think, was appointed by the governor.

Nathan: Oh, yes. I did see that in the paper, that people can just come and testify.

Asawa: Testify and protest, or whatever will happen today. So, it will be an interesting report to see what the community's response to the selection of the people is.

Nathan: And there's going to be a hearing, I understand, in Los Angeles.

Asawa: And one in Los Angeles, yes. I think this is to get input from the community on how they feel about it. All of these things will then be brought back to the meeting that we'll have.

Nathan: That's to the advisory group?

Asawa: That's going to be the advisory committee and the commission. They're all going to meet together.

Nathan: I see. About how big is this advisory committee?

Asawa: Well, I would say that each category had at least four or five people, so that I would say that it may be 20 people. There may be 20 or 25 of us on that. I'm not sure how many are on the commission. Gregorio wants to increase it and William Kent is saying that it should not be increased. I just got a letter from Gregorio.

Nathan: Do you have any particular view on that?

Asawa: Well, it's better to have a smaller, active group than a large membership thing.

Nathan: Because then you'd break down into committees anyway?

Asawa: Yes. And then you have to divide and then you're not as effective, I don't think. I think that it's important that the commission have professionals on it, not just people who are concerned with it.

Nathan: Not just lay people, then?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Now, these funds are state funds that come from the Gregorio Bill?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Does California get any funds from the National Endowment for the Arts?

Asawa: No. I think this is--

Nathan: This is really a separate enterprise?

Asawa: Yes, it's separate. I think the thing is if you could get state funding, then you can take that and match it with the Endowment.

Nathan: Oh, I see. But you need to get your state funding?

Asawa: I think, yes. I mean, depending on what category. I think some have to have a match, I guess. I don't know that much about it, but some things don't need a match.

One of the things that came up in our group was that the match is very difficult for a lot of people.

Nathan: Right. The poorer you are, the harder it is.

Asawa: The harder it is, yes. So, you know, a lot of people give so much time that if there should be a greater consideration for "in-kind" service--

Nathan: Right, that "in-kind" service should be ranked similar to actually matching funds.

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: That would make a tremendous difference.

Asawa: Yes. Of course, \$1 million is not enough for the state.

Nathan: No.

Asawa: That's really the problem.

New California Arts Council (1976)

Nathan: You have been named by the Governor to a new state arts commission, haven't you?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: I understand you had a phone conversation with him, is that right? Tell me a little about that. How did this come about and what was in your mind?

Asawa: I had gotten a call from the Governor's office to ask if I would be on the council, by Jacques Barzaghi.

Nathan: Do you know him?

Asawa: I know him now, yes. Before that, there was a group of artists that came together for the first time last fall, I think it was, or last summer, to talk about finally bringing the visual artists together. It had never happened before. I went to that meeting. Then I was put

Asawa: on the steering committee. Then on the steering committee, names were recommended for the council. I really didn't look forward to being on that, so I did not put my name on the list.

I finally left the steering committee, but I said I would help if I could in any way. But I didn't feel that the meetings really were important. Anyway, Mr. Barzaghi called and asked if I would consider being on the council. I said I didn't know what the Governor had in mind, and he said, "He doesn't have anything in mind." I said, "Well, he must have some thoughts on it."

So, another commissioner called me and talked a while. I said I really had to talk to the Governor about it. That was the advice that Mr. Zellerbach gave me. He said, "Don't get on the council unless you first know what is happening." (I went to see Mr. Zellerbach about it, talked to him, that this was proposed.)

So, he called in and we talked.

Nathan: The Governor called?

Asawa: Yes. He asked me to come to the breakfast, the Prayer Breakfast. [Laughter]

Nathan: Marvelous. So you went?

Asawa: Yes. Somebody picked me up and I went the night before the breakfast. Then when we got there, the Sufi Choir was there.

Nathan: What are they like?

Asawa: They're a very interesting group. Allaudin Matthieu, one of the commissioners, is from Cincinnati and trained in classical music, with the piano, I think. He said that we all want to do our own thing; this is an important point because the Governor is very open to anything. He wants the best solution for California; he wants the council to be effective.

Nathan: When you talked to the Governor, is it fair to ask the kind of things you discussed, or what impression you got from Brown himself?

Asawa: I asked him whether he was going to run for the presidency. He said, "I can't tell you. I might." I said, "What's going to happen to the arts council? Just get it all started and leave it?" He said, "Well, you know, I could get beaten, and I'd be out of a job. But the issue is right now and I have to deal with things as they are now." He wants to get our priorities and get what is really important. He's interested in education. I said, "I'm only interested in education; that's all I'm interested in. If this council isn't going to be involved in it, then I shouldn't be on this council."

Asawa: He said that the others had already started with the Department of Education in art education, being concerned with artists in schools and art education--not "arts education" but "artists in education," which is quite different, and artists in schools. And also the idea of the same thing that we were trying to do in San Francisco--that we have artists in Criminal Justice, in Social Services, in the Highway department. He's allocated \$100 thousand for highway art.

Nathan: What is highway art?

Asawa: Well, murals in--

Nathan: The tubes?

Asawa: Different places, yes, or offices or whatever. They're setting that up. That's from advice from local artists. Some of them met with Jim Buffalo and La Raza, René Yanez, and they had met with the Governor before. You remember the speaker at the Council for Civic Unity dinner was Ybarra? He was already telling me about what the Governor was doing with CETA and was going to try to get the Governor interested in that for community arts.

These are all ideas; we hadn't met formally yet, but this was just in conversation.

So, it's not that he's interested in what I'm interested in, but I think that he will listen. He has no preconceived ideas about what art should be. He said, "I don't play a violin like Mayor Alioto." [Laughter] I told him maybe he should take a few lessons in pottery; it wouldn't hurt him. He said, "Maybe I should." He was very easy to talk to.

Somebody was talking about his vetoing the privacy [of personal data] bill and he went into that. I don't remember quite what he said--why he vetoed it. He said that it was just going to build another bureaucracy. Every time you changed your job, you were going to have to record that, and the whole thing would have been a big thing. At this point everything is separate; the departments are separate, so that it's hard to bring the information about one person together anyway. Now, in a way bureaucracy is an advantage on this [Laughter]. But if you got the whole thing together, it would be a massive, massive thing, spending millions and millions of dollars. And also he said it exempts the police; they're the only ones that are exempt from it. So what good is it? That's where you want the privacy to be most! You don't care about your insurance company or other things, but that the police can scramble through your files any time.

So he's very clear. I think he's surrounding himself with people that keep him informed.

Nathan: Do you think he'll listen?

Asawa: Yes, I think so.

Nathan: Will the council, as you understand it, be making allocations of funds?

Asawa: We have to decide; we have to decide how to spend the money, whether it will be for grants, whether it will be for institutions, whether it will be for organizations--

Nathan: Or individuals?

Asawa: --or individuals. However.

Nathan: So, in a sense, you will be facing from the other side this whole business that you were speaking of earlier, of guidelines, of allocations--

Asawa: We're making the guidelines. There is legislation already, which is very flexible, which could be dangerous and it could also be free. But that really is a risk we have to take.

Nathan: And you're hoping, I gather from what you have said, that you can avoid the kind of manipulation that you sense has been going on?

Asawa: Right.

Nathan: That's a challenge, isn't it?

Asawa: It is. That's why it's critical who the council members are. They have to be very knowledgeable and they have to be well informed people, and open.

Nathan: And they have to care.

Asawa: Yes. Open people with no personal ambitions. The council has to be without anyone who wants personal gain from it.

Nathan: Do you know the other council members yet?

Asawa: I've just met about four of them. Gary Snyder and Noah Purifoy from Los Angeles (the Watts area), and the new director, Eloise Smith.

Nathan: That should be a terrific experience.

Asawa: It will be very interesting, I think.

Nathan: How long is your term?

Asawa: I didn't even get a date. I got a certificate; I don't even have a date on it.

Nathan: [Laughter] You have an open-ended appointment?

Asawa: [Laughter] No, it's probably a year. That all has to be spelled out by the council.

Nathan: Have you yet formulated some ideas that you want to present?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Is it something that you would want to talk about?

Asawa: It may be premature to talk about it. But basically it would focus on artists, using artists to effect art rather than institutions to effect art, which has been traditional.

Nathan: So you're thinking, in a sense, more in terms of the individual rather than the structure?

Asawa: Yes, right.

Nathan: Will it build in some way on the experiences that you've been talking about?

Asawa: Yes. So that instead of focusing on supporting the institution, you focus it on using artists to change the institution. I think that that is really the practical, most effective way to do it.

Nathan: It's very interesting that your point of view and the Governor's point of view in many ways are in harmony to begin with.

Asawa: Sure.

Nathan: Will you be leaving the San Francisco Art Commission?

Asawa: Yes. As soon as somebody's appointed, I will leave. They need to find a sculptor to replace me.

Nathan: Is there something else that comes to your mind about this opportunity at the state level?

Asawa: I don't think that the arts council as a body need ever have so much money to dispose of. I think what they need is to direct the money that is already being allocated to all of the departments and all the institutions and the educational institutions, to use their money in a different way.

Nathan: So you're not really focusing so much on the arts council's budget as you are on the state budget?

Asawa: Right. That's what I'm interested in. I think that when a school district such as San Francisco has \$21 million over the district funds in state and federal money to bring about change, that's a lot of money. So that the arts council handling a million dollars, that's just nothing; that's unimportant how much the arts council gets. I mean it would be nice to have more to play with, but it's really unimportant; it's how we are spending all the other money that is critical.

I think that just in San Francisco alone, in this program that we've been talking about, this \$3.8 million is more money than the entire National Endowment [for the Arts] has for artists in schools for the country.

Public Support for Artists

Nathan: You were saying when you were on the advisory committee that you would be willing to move off if another artist were available.

Asawa: Sure, I would. I think the most important thing in the long run is that it's a mistake that I'm not used as an artist.

Nathan: Right.

Asawa: Because I said that the time that I was appointed to the San Francisco Art Commission, had I been appointed to be an artist for the city, the city would be much richer with a lot of things. That's why I feel that the city, in a way--I don't know. It's a very hard question, because we had that discussion just recently about should the artists unionize--some said, "Oh, you can never, never organize the artists."

But, on the other hand, when you think of how the city does not use its artists, you know--they hire a streetcleaner if the street gets worse, they hire police if violence comes in, if crime rises they get more police, and if the office work gets heavier, then they hire another clerk. But they don't have one artist hired by the city, except with the two percent (of the cost of the building--to be used for art), where we commission an individual artist to do a piece. The Symphony is subsidized, and, of course, the Neighborhood Arts is a subsidy. It's the only subsidy that we have for the arts.

Nathan: In a way, I suppose the Neighborhood Arts has maybe a broader intent than just support of a fine artist. Does it have a social element?

Asawa: Yes. I mean, it has no intention of supporting an artist. There is no program where the artist is supported and I think that that is indicative of where our mental state--I mean, state of mind or level of aesthetics--is.

Nathan: Yes, it certainly shows the priorities, doesn't it?

Asawa: Yes. But that's why I think that if we could do this for artists-- a group of artists who can work with children would be in that category. And there's a group who can't work with children, but could do something for a school, could do a project so that children could watch and have that experience of a muralist painting a fresco mural. I think that that's a terribly important part of education, part of it, and it would be much healthier for a city to have that.

Nathan: I suppose, then, in a sense, you could say that your participation on the city commission has probably educated those art commissioners.

Asawa: Oh, yes. I think so.

Nathan: I would hate to have you think that your time was wasted.

Asawa: Oh, no. Yes, that's right. I don't regret the time, but I'm just saying that I think it's very important for the city to begin to think about housing for artists, so that within any housing project, public housing, there should be a certain number of studio living quarters allowed in it. What happens is that an artist can then have an effect on the entire project, if he were so oriented.

A young man came and I talked to him. He was in the office and I talked to him for a while. He said that during the Kennedy administration, there was legislation passed saying something to the effect that in public housing, that there would be room for artists-- and I said that if he would look that up, then if it is indeed law, we would begin to pursue that here in San Francisco.

We hope that Fort Mason will become such a thing. That's the National Park Recreation area.

Nathan: Is there going to be housing in Fort Mason?

Asawa: Not housing, but studios. Housing is one thing and work space is another. I would think that if we were to choose, I would take a studio because you could get a broader spectrum of artists. You would affect more artists that way.

Nathan: So, you really would like to see artists hired and working in the schools and you'd like to see them with studio places provided in public housing. You would like to see them hired by the city.

Asawa: Yea. Because now they're not used. We use streetcleaners; I keep saying the streetcleaners. We need streetcleaners, but there's never anything that comes from that. The next day, it's the same thing. But when you use artists and you have them paint a mural, it's good for 20 years. It's a much sounder investment in terms of what you get for it, and I think it's the cheapest investment you can make.

Asawa: You could do studies on the problems and you can spend \$200,000 on a study of the problem. But if you had spent \$200,000 on a group of artists to talk about the ugliness of the city or the ugliness of the Western Addition or the ghetto or something and you put them to work, then you would have the solution and the study all at once. Then it would go on and it would be beneficial beyond the study.

So, I think we're too study-oriented. It's just a delay tactic to avoid the issue. You see, we refuse to see the issues. We refuse to face the facts and the problems are very simple to solve if you want to. I think that we have gone a long way in solving the minority-ethnic problems of a city. I think artists are in every racial group--that has nothing to do with race, it's not a group of people, but it's just that they represent a part of each person. They are a "minority of one" and it's how one can save one's own individuality.

Of course, the argument against any kind of subsidy towards artists is that they say they abuse their freedom and then you get state art, national art. I think that that depends on the artist that you get, you know. In Holland, they do have a subsidy for artists and I guess they have to go through art school and then they have to--I don't know what the residency requirement is. You have to be citizen of Holland, I think. You can't be an outsider. And then you do so many pieces a year for the city or for the state.

You know, the danger of that is it's abused. I don't know whether it's being abused now or not, but, I mean, in theory it's a very good thing.

Nathan: Yes, I guess it would depend on the quality and the integrity of the artist.

Asawa: Yes, of the community at large.

Nathan: "Gee, I've only done five this year. I'll have to whack out one more."

Asawa: [Laughter] That's right, yes. And people abuse it, but nevertheless, I still think that it's worth doing. It's worth trying. I would like to try it in San Francisco. That's what I'm interested in.

Personally, I like my own independence and I'm not terribly interested in it for myself.

Nathan: You don't need that security?

Asawa: I mean, that doesn't interest me personally, but I think that for the general good of the city, I think it would be a very good thing to try here. Don't you think?

Nathan: Yes. I think it does have great appeal. I was also wondering about that two percent, which seems very small, really, for art in a public building.

Asawa: Yes. That's not mandatory; it's voluntary, optional. That's why the Art Commission has gone after it. If you don't go after it, then--

Nathan: You don't get it?

Asawa: And if it's not in the original planning stage and it's not asked for at the very beginning when the architects come in to give the plan, then you don't get it.

Nathan: Has the provision actually been utilized?

Asawa: Oh, yes. We asked about the airport. We asked about Market Street beautification. We ask about any utilities building. Even if it's a sewage plant, we ask, "Why not?" I feel that it is worth it to the city to make every part of the city beautiful on its own. The public won't ever see that, but there are people who work in there and I think that that's important, any and all of it to have happened in the city.

The Private Sector and the Arts

Asawa: I think private businesses are beginning to realize the importance of the kind of pressures that are put on their employees. We started with the coffee break, right? One in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Nathan: Right.

Asawa: Now they have a lounge. Now they have bowling. Now they are beginning to try to offer all these things to their employees. Well, I think that one artist thought that this might be something that would be very good. In every new building that goes up, there should be a floor that would be used for art, and this was something that a radio announcer said when I was doing something with KYA and being on a panel with young students. He said, "I would just love to have a place for art." So if you were a businessman or if you were an executive and you were in this high-powered, pressure thing, then within that building that you were occupying, there would be a place where you could go and do something.

Nathan: Maybe a little studio of some kind?

Asawa: Studio, or a place where you could go and be able to work--and you would want that. You would want that space and you would use it. Or you would have yoga, or you would have kind of a comprehensive kind of thing within each building that you could really develop. Then, this would be a way in which artists can serve the private sector of the city and then there's another way that the city could do it in the public sector--through the schools, you know, so that all of this can blend, because we're all beginning to realize that something is wrong. We can't stop the buildings from going up, and we are now becoming a financial center and all of the tiny, little businesses are being pushed out. We're becoming a service-oriented community.

Nathan: In San Francisco?

Asawa: In San Francisco, yes. I mean, clerks, waiters, you know. Everything is service.

Nathan: Insurance too?

Asawa: Insurance. Everything is service, so that we have to do something for those people. We also have to do something with those who commute in and use the city also. We're all sort of half satisfied in every area that we're working, you know, and we're doing it full-time and we have a fraction of satisfaction.

Nathan: And there's something that hungers.

Asawa: There is, yes. And even, going off the subject and going back to what I said before, over the years I've seen a lot of people in advertising, or people who are doing a building, or designers, who come in and they're in this high-powered public relations and they come and they want something that they can put in an ad. I see them when they're about 42 or 43 or 45 and they're the people who are a success, you know, and they're beginning to be replaced by a new crop, the designers who are coming to design. You begin to see this pushing and these are the people who have given their best years to industry. They're really used to a high salaried, fast life, a turnover in clothes, a turnover in furniture. They're into that always, you know, cocktail parties. All this is part of the price you pay for that kind of life.

So, they do in a way envy the peaceful, kind of ordinary, daily routine that an artist has in his studio.

Nathan: And they feel perhaps that they have missed out on that.

Asawa: Yes, that they have sold out in another way. But I think that we're now going to have to get into doing this. Art is not the solution. I mean, it really isn't, but it's the closest. It's the closest

Asawa: to being the closest to yourself, I think. I just think that it's too bad that people aren't used this way.

Nathan: It's curious that art is valued, but it's very hard to get someone to actually put out money for artists.

Asawa: Sure. Well, you see, like for example, a big business like Standard or any oil company, they spend millions a year on advertising, advertising! These are things, you know, that you throw away, like a slot on TV. It's gone! It's such a waste! But if they would spend, say, \$2 million or \$3 million a year on works of art, they would be here today, here tomorrow and forever, and they would serve the community. Of course, maybe that doesn't sell gasoline. It won't sell, but I think that if you were investing in an overall time, I think that should be their service to the community, public service. If the service goes on, they'd get public relations, person-to-person.

Nathan: Right.

Asawa: I just think it's such a misuse of people. Don't you think?

Nathan: Yes, I do. I think everyone has to have something that he understands he's living for, or something that is going to have some lasting quality. Otherwise, it just all falls apart.

Asawa: It's not enough, yes. I think we should remember that we're becoming a tourist community. We should remember and we should think about why people come to San Francisco and we don't have to do too much to make it pleasant. But, on the other hand, we have a great opportunity. If the schools become so exciting that they would become part of a Grayline Tour, then what a service we'd do for the whole country. Instead of hiding our schools, we would get to be part of the--

Nathan: Larger picture?

Asawa: Yes. I don't know what we're going to do with the reading scores. [Laughter]

Nathan: Well, you have some fascinating ideas in a very important sector.

Asawa: Yes. Well, the thing is the reading score is not the issue. I mean, that's important. I'm not trying to minimize it.

Nathan: It may be a signal that many other things are wrong?

Asawa: That's right.

Two Percent for Art and the S.F. Art Commission

Nathan: Can we talk a little more, if you're interested in it, about the requirement that the two percent of the cost of a public building be addressed to art?

Asawa: In San Francisco?

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: Yes. That ordinance came in, I think--Bufano and Jeremy Ets-Hokin are the two that I think are responsible for getting that through and that was when they were art commissioners many years ago. It hasn't always been picked up and used and I think we have, since I've been on the commission, tried to use it as much as possible. The Hall of Justice is one example, where we have the Peter Voulkos, and we have Sid Gordon, and we have Richard Diebenkorn. We have a lot of paintings inside and we have two major sculptures, Demetrius Aristedes did a sculpture for that. Ray Sells did two planters for the outside. That was \$145,000 that we spent on the Hall of Justice project.

Protest and Civic Center Design

Asawa: I think probably the way I got into the Art Commission was that, I guess, months before Mayor Alioto was elected there were three of us who protested the use of money for landscaping that we thought was money for art enrichment. The history of that goes back before, when Christopher was mayor and when Brooks Hall was put in. There was \$250,000--that was the two percent--which was supposed to go to embellish the Civic Center.

Then, at that time, the architects on the Art Commission decided that they didn't like the design that was put on top of the Civic Center and they wanted to put on an architectural competition. So, they took the money from sculpture and they made it into a competition, but what they did was, they invited architects to submit. Sculptors could submit too, but it was more of an architectural competition. They spent \$50,000 promoting that all over the world. They got a winner. I'm not sure whether he was Hungarian or what. Then, when the competition was over, they found that that would cost \$1.5 million to build. They had only \$250,000 and they spent \$50,000 on the competition--\$25,000 or \$50,000 on that--so that there was \$185,000 left, I think it was. So, that went out the window.

Nathan: Where was this supposed to go?

Asawa: The Civic Center. You see, they replaced the original Civic Center. It was beautiful--there were two round pools and there were entrances from the corner. There were two pools where the grass is now. The original plan to replace that was very similar. Doug Baylis worked on it for a long time with, I think, Skidmore's office. They made a beautiful plan and then Christopher somehow got word that something was wrong with that. He canned the whole design and told them to come up with something else in a very short time, seven or eight weeks. In a very short time they had to come up with this design that we have now.

Nathan: Those little flat pools with the little jets?

Asawa: No. It was like a rectangular pool in the center. But it was unfinished. There was still \$185,000 for art enrichment and the Art Commission was responsible for doing something about it, but they never did anything about it. Then, because they didn't do anything, it went back into the General Fund, so we no longer have that money to work with.

So, that summer of '67 we were there. It was in April when we went before the board and we objected to changing the landscape. It didn't need landscaping, but it really needed sculpture or mosaic or really a sculptural focus.

Nathan: Who were the other two who joined you in this?

Asawa: Gerald Nordland, the director of the San Francisco Museum then, and Joseph Ehreth. He's no longer living. We went and spoke and that was when Martin Snipper said, "You artists are always complaining and you never do anything. You can't get yourselves together, organized enough to put any kind of pressure on the city, and you're too independent." He was furious. He's always been furious with the artists.

Nathan: Was he suggesting political action?

Asawa: Yes. He was saying that if the artists would get together--instead of being so self-centered--and work collectively, then they would be a voice in the community. I think you can see that happening now.

Nathan: Right. How did you know that Gerald Nordland and Joe Ehreth were interested, or had the same feelings?

Asawa: Actually, do you know who came to me? Joe came to me.

Nathan: Was he a photographer?

Asawa: He was a photographer. You knew him?

Nathan: Yes, I remember him.

Asawa: He worked for the wine industry, the California wine publication-- you know, Wines and Vines. And then he worked with Lawrence Halprin in his office.

Nathan: Oh, right. You were saying that Joe Ehreth came and talked to you about the Civic Center problem at the time.

Asawa: Yes, because he knew that there was money left that the city had, and a new design was being presented. Walter Haas had given Lawrence Halprin's office \$6,000 to do a study on it. They were going to present it before the Board of Supervisors to take out the pool from the center, make that a brick paving, change the paving, change the trees. It was essentially really doing a lot of trees and doing the pool and putting back the round pools to the original site where the grass is now. So, it would have been a major change.

But actually, since the trees had grown up that high and the pool was there, Joe felt that there was no reason just to change the landscape. He wanted to talk to some people, so he came over and talked to us about it. We talked to Nordland about it and the meeting came up, so I called Martin about it too.

Nathan: You had known Martin from before?

Asawa: Oh, he was director of the Art Festival in 1950, so I've known him since 1950. I think that Sally Hellyer was an art commissioner then. The Art Commission wasn't going to do anything about it, but the money was only good until July of 1967. Then it was going to go back into the General Fund. This was in April or May, so, we went to that hearing.

Nathan: This was an Art Commission hearing?

Asawa: No, the Board of Supervisors' hearing. The three of us got up and spoke. In fact, Joe had another plan. He had another plan for Van Ness Avenue, which would have made the traffic go underground from Grove to McAllister, and there would have been a plaza or mall that would connect the Opera House and City Hall. At that time, they were also talking about the cultural center or the extension on Franklin Street that Skidmore was doing and Joe was objecting to that also. You know, he was always agitating. He was always into doing something outrageous. But I really thought that that was an excellent idea about changing the traffic flow so that there would be some connection there. On top of that, he thought that we could do something about the plaza too. He was a very good friend of Bufano. He was concerned that we could get a Bufano there, that we could get works of art that were already in storage and begin to do something with them. So, he had sort of plans.

Asawa: The idea seemed sound, so I thought that maybe we could help him. You know, I had no interest in the Art Commission or any of that. It simply was my mind, my head, wasn't there.

Nathan: Was it hard for you to speak?

Asawa: Yes. It was the first time I had spoken in public and also I didn't like it because Larry was a friend, you know, and I wasn't interested in trying to challenge him or anything, but I did feel that it was wrong to change the landscaping. Then, their estimate would have cost \$234,000 to do. There was only \$185,000 to do that, so that they couldn't possibly do what he had designed anyway.

Landscaping or Art

Nathan: At this point was there some thought that Mr. Haas would contribute, would make a gift to pay some of the expenses?

Asawa: I don't think so. It was just that he gave the study money to get this changed. But the design didn't seem to make any difference. It wouldn't have mattered, one design over another. There still wouldn't have been any money for art in the plaza.

So, the thing that we felt was that that money should go to finish the fountain, do something with that, put in sculpture and do something with that. I remember William Blake was a supervisor then and he was very outspoken, in a way supporting us, but his thoughts were that we could get these sort of white copies of--

Nathan: Yes, of Greek and Roman sculpture?

Asawa: From Italy we could import these for about \$20,000. That would be a nice thing to do. I mean, whatever his taste was, he began to understand what it would mean to have sculpture in the plaza. Doug Baylis's argument, and he was right, was that it was unfair to judge the plaza until it was completed. And the water jets were only put in there temporarily until the works of art would be put in there, sculpture or a fountain, whatever. And he was given \$1,200 or something to put those in. So, if you look at the site as a background, you could actually do some very beautiful things with it. So, it's not the shape or anything else; it's just that it's not finished. So, that was my first experience with City Hall.

Art Commission and Its Role

Nathan: Did you feel that the other supervisors were interested in the point that you were expressing?

Asawa: I think they were. I can't remember who else was on it. I just remember Blake speaking up about it. Well, then I said to Martin that the Art Commission should make some kind of commitment. They had two months to do something in. I think at that time he and Sally were sort of always clashing or something, so nothing really happened. I think Tony de Lap was on the Art Commission and he was a sculptor commissioner when the Art Commission decided to make this international competition. They wanted to do something grand.

Nathan: Was it Christopher who named you?

Asawa: No. Mayor Alioto.

Nathan: It was Alioto. How did he approach you?

Asawa: Well, I'd never had any contact with him. He asked Alfred Frankenstein and Gerald Nordland to send a list of people that they thought would be good on the Art Commission and I was on that list. I don't know who else was, but there were several names.

Nathan: Can you say what you feel your particular mission is on the Art Commission? (if that's not too strong a word)

Asawa: Well, I think that the thing is for the city to become aware of the advantages of having an active Art Commission because I think if you're being hard-nosed about it and objective, it's the best investment--works of art--for a city. It's the best use of money because if the money is commissioned to do a work of art, that is here 25 years, 50 years from now, whereas a service like the Police Department or social service, those have to be replenished, and the same for street cleaning, you know. That never adds up to anything, but a wall or a painting or a tapestry becomes part of a city's art collection and a lot of people can benefit from it long after the money's been spent. So, a thousand dollar investment in a painting goes on and on and it can even appreciate as the years go by.

But I think the thing that is important is that the artists in the community be used and I don't mean exploited. Actually using their service is probably as important if not more important than to solve human problems, individual problems as well as city problems, as well as social and economic problems, in a city. It doesn't do that much to increase the police force because there's more violence and there are more drugs. But if that kind of money could be spent

Asawa: in the arts, then I think that it's a better use because then we're dealing with real human needs and not political and social needs, but human needs.

And then I think that people pretty much can solve their own problems if they're given an opportunity or a better environment or are able to participate in changing their neighborhood or their school or their parks. If they have some investment in it, there would be less destruction because that same energy could be used in building up instead of destroying. I'm really more concerned with the human condition. I mean, I'm not concerned with government. I'm really more concerned with making the city a livable place for everyone. So, I'm not really concerned just with artists and art and that. I think that all the parts have to function and I think that we can't sort of ignore Hunters Point or Chinatown or the Sunset or the Richmond. We can't really say, "Well, we'll just give them federal money," or, "We'll just do this or do that." It's just that they need to bring people in with ideas and I think that as far as I can see the Art Commission is--I won't say it's the only group, but it is a commission that is ignored by the city and it should be used and it should become active and function.

Studios, Foundries and Hiring

Nathan: What can you suggest as the kinds of thing you would like to see the commission do? Of course it does certain things now, like the Neighborhood Arts Program, and the festivals and so on. What do you envision as being the next step that an Art Commission like San Francisco's could take?

Asawa: Well, I think there should be workshops, big operations, not just little workshops here and there, but, you know, like we have the Department of Public Works; the city should have a foundry where artists can work. And I think the museums should have studios within the museum so that there is some connection with the exhibit, so that people don't come just to see the finished product, but that somehow there is an opportunity for them to see the whole process. Also we should get somehow more involved with all the other agencies in the city, that we should not feel about the schools, "That's their business." I think the schools are our business; it's everybody's business, whether it's the Art Commission or Park Service or Police Department.

It's not just bringing in a police car and letting people ride around in the police car and letting them get friendly. I think that's sort of superficial and I think there should be a greater

Asawa: program that is interconnected. I think the Art Commission should definitely help the schools find artists, rather than their being hired by a personnel office that knows nothing about art.

I think the Art Commission and the business community should come together because whether they're children or whether they're citizens, if we don't really produce people who have a lot of skills, the businesses suffer because their work efficiency is so low. Then, with the unions getting stronger and stronger and demanding more and more for less and less work, it's going to cost more and more for a product. So, in the end, the poor people or all of us begin to suffer.

Art and Independence

Nathan: In what way would an increased understanding or capability in art help to solve that kind of problem?

Asawa: Well, I think that from a young person's point of view we're talking about self-confidence and not being afraid, and identity and awareness. Then we have to go on a weekend to touch people and say, "You're okay. I love you." You know, all of this sort of abstract kind of awareness is really not necessary if people really have a kind of combination of self-confidence through being able to take care of themselves.

I think that's primarily what I'm interested in, making it possible for people to become independent, as independent and self-sufficient as possible. That has nothing really to do with just art, except that through the arts you can learn many, many skills that you cannot learn through books and problem-solving in the abstract. I mean, for example, you can learn to tile a bath or you can learn to design a mosaic. That whole skill can open up the possibility for a person. A child doing a mosaic project in school or in a church or in a Park and Recreation project learns something about color, about design, about observing objects in nature. If you want to do that, that would grow into a greater awareness of things around you, and then you also learn a skill. That skill can then put him into even tiling his own bathroom or going into the business of it or, if he decides to be an artist, he has a greater choice. I think that that's really what art can do, that it's not meant to produce artists, but it's making people more flexible.

Nathan: And, in a sense, to revive this sort of craftsman capability?

Asawa: Yes. And I think that's really the important thing of using the body and the mind, not separating it. Actually, there's no possible way that we can separate it because we're the body and we're the head

Asawa: too. I think that the combination of both of them will make people better, more highly skilled in thinking and improving whatever business one goes into, or whatever occupation. It makes a person broader and I think the narrowness in which we've made our adult world is just such a--I mean, adults are such a bore.

Nathan: Compared to children?

Asawa: Well, yes. Compared to young people, who are still open, and I think that one of the dangers is the kind of fear that we pass on as adults. We're afraid to move. We're afraid to explore. We're afraid to change jobs. We're afraid to make a decision. We're afraid to say, "No," to a child. We're really paralyzed and that I feel very much in the city government and in school administration. I've spent most of my life not wasting very much time on people or things that don't amount to anything.

Being on the Art Commission and working in the schools, I've had to be very patient because things move so slowly and for us to have to discuss things 30 different ways is really outrageous. I think that anything that you can't make a decision on by one or two phone calls or one or two meetings you shouldn't bother doing. With my own work, I just think and I make the decision. I'm not saying that things that take time--I'm just talking about making a decision. So, I just think people are really victims, I think, and especially adults. That's why I feel very sorry for a lot of teachers and a lot of people who are afraid to speak up.

Nathan: You feel that this kind of openness you find in children could be preserved throughout one's whole life?

Asawa: Oh, yes. I think the problem that we're facing is because we haven't done this. I think we have to stop funneling people into one train of thought. That's why I think an artist is valuable, because they think in a way about themselves--no, that's not such a good--but each person is capable of an idea. This goes back to the approach, and I think we've probably already said it, in the way that, at Black Mountain, Albers spoke. He presents a problem and then each one of us comes with a solution and we discuss all of the solutions and each one of us goes back with those seven or eight solutions and we come back with another mix, so that each one of us has to be responsible for thinking for ourselves. I think that that's the important thing and that's not to be chaotic. It means that it opens up new options. As jobs get scarcer and scarcer, teaching positions are not going to--you know, there are no teaching positions open.

In Hawaii there will not be any elementary school positions open except for attrition until 1980. There will probably be only 72 positions open in secondary and only 68, something like 68, for special ed, which would be compensatory, gifted, whatever. So, there

Asawa: are virtually no jobs. But nobody talks about the real issue of ideas. They're talking about jobs. So, the School of Ed (Education) should close up if that's true. If they don't need those teachers, then they should just close it up and deal with real problems. The real problem is that people are going to have to stop thinking that they're studying to be teachers, but they have to begin to think that they're going to start studying to do something. I think that that's the important thing.

I don't expect the Art Commission to do all that, but I'm just saying this in terms of my interest in making a city government become more active, more positively active, instead of being hung up, unwilling to give, so that the Art Commission has to keep begging for this and begging for that. The city government should take the leadership in really making the two percent mandatory, so that the artists can work with respect and be useful in the community.

Nathan: This two percent for art in public buildings is simply advisory now? It is not a mandatory requirement?

Asawa: No. They can reject it, but so far they haven't rejected it.

Nathan: Who would do the rejection if it were rejected?

Asawa: I guess the Board of Supervisors maybe.

Nathan: I see. Do you have the feeling that your general views are matched by those of some others on the Art Commission?

Asawa: Oh, yes. I think we have a good commission now.

VIII PANELS AND CONFERENCES

Schools and Arts

Asawa: I'm on the Advisory Panel for the National Endowment for Artists in Schools and Wilson Riles' new commission for better schools. I don't know the title of that. I have it in the kitchen. It's called RISE--Reform Intermediate and Secondary Education.

Nathan: Is that the one that's going to work in San Francisco?

Asawa: It's going to work statewide and so I have to go to a meeting in Los Angeles. I was on the Visual Arts Panel of the State Arts Commission. I think the significant thing about all of this is that they for the first time asked an artist to serve.

You know, Mr. Zellerbach was president of the San Francisco Art Commission and he did all of the ground work of getting the city persuaded into supporting art and now they are really getting a working commission going. But they're actually trying to find practicing artists to serve and this all comes about, I think, through the Neighborhood Arts Program because that program is the only one, I think, in the country as far along as it is. So, I think San Francisco really has done a great deal.

Nathan: Right. Now, am I right in thinking that there are two different state level commissions? One was the State Arts Commission [later the California Arts Council] and one is Wilson Riles' schools commission?

Riles Commission

Asawa: Yes. Just a minute. I can get you some information. [Pause while searching for name.] This is a letter from Wilson Riles--[reading portion of letter]: "--to appoint you to our statewide secondary education reform commission." And that's going to meet for the next

Asawa: six months. And that is [resumes reading]: "--a re-examination of the role and function of our junior and senior high schools is long overdue. Although some secondary schools provide excellent educational programs, far too many fail to offer learning experiences geared to meeting the needs of high school students in the latter half of this century."

Nathan: I see. Do you yet know who else may be on this?

Asawa: No, I don't know.

Nathan: Do you have any knowledge of how you were picked for this RISE Commission?

Asawa: No. Well, I don't know. Do you know Miss Goldman, Richard Goldman's sister?

Nathan: Yes. Marianne?

Asawa: Yes. I don't know. She may be involved in it and maybe Lucille Abrahamson (member of the San Francisco School Board). I'm sure it's from our program, the Alvarado program.

Minneapolis Conference on Textbooks

Nathan: You have just gotten back from Minneapolis?

Asawa: Yes. I went to a book conference on textbooks on minority groups and what schools use for texts for the instructional material. It seems to be inadequate, although the publishers are trying very hard to do something about it and they're asking for help.

Nathan: What kind of help do they want?

Asawa: They're looking for people with information that might be useful.

Nathan: This is to make the textbooks reflect accurately the--

Asawa: The history. The American Indians--they call them native Americans now--want accurate history. The Japanese want the whole internment to be accurately recorded and what actually happened to the people after they returned. The Chicanos wanted I guess more material in bilingual education. Each side bullying the other, and the publishers seemed to be the bad guys. They kept talking about the cost of paper and the rising costs of printing. And yet they said they had less money to spend carelessly now. [Telephone]

Nathan: I just wanted to repeat that this was Imogen Cunningham who called you. And is she still active?

Asawa: Oh, yes. She's asking about going to Jacob's opening of his photographs at the DeYoung Museum tomorrow morning, and she's also calling to see if our daughter will come to clean her house; she cleans once every two weeks.

Nathan: I see.

So, did you get the impression, then, that the publishers were trying to satisfy the demands of the boards of education or the community? Because they have to sell to the boards of education, don't they?

Asawa: Yes. Well, that's what users accused them of--always compromising, coming to a middle ground.

Grassroots Materials

Nathan: Were there any boards of education represented at this meeting?

Asawa: Well, not boards, but superintendents of schools, very big publishers. There were many publishers who had taken risks, so that things that might sell in Chicago would not sell, of course, in Texas. There are many pockets in this country that are really very isolated yet.

The feeling that I got was that people were going more to printing their own material, so that the local communities are xeroxing things and organizing their own groups of teachers and administrators together to design something that would be useful to them. The suggestion was that there should be some vehicle to get these isolated projects together in the hands of publishers; a group, a body of people who would say that this could be used nationwide, or this is only a local matter. As for money that is being used by Title IV (I can't remember what title), in instructional material and preparation, a lot of school districts are taking that money and using their teachers' time and money to prepare material that is not in textbooks.

There were two or three people from HEW (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) one from the National Endowment for the Humanities, wondering why there couldn't be some way in which the publishers and the government could come together on collaborating, rather than publishers competing with one another; possibly one publisher would do one area, so they're not trying to fight each other

Asawa: but they're working together with HEW and have a subsidy. So much of the money is now going to instructional materials that are being done locally.

Nathan: What do you think of the growth of the sort of grassroots creation of materials?

Asawa: I think it's possibly the way we have to go. I think there is a danger in that also, if there aren't people there that are highly qualified at the local level. But it's still closer to dealing with the problems that are local. And I think the thing that has to be defined, whether it's local or national, is what is a common thread that goes through what is necessary information that everyone has to have, regardless of what economic, what social, what ethnic group. There are certain things, I think, that are pretty essential. These can be done nationally or regionally or statewide.

Also, sex bias is one of the big issues. Women--they're one of the minorities too. And then there were representatives from all--not the Filipinos or the Samoans, but the Black, the Chicano, the Japanese, Chinese.

Nathan: Was anything said about getting together again at a given time?

Asawa: They may do something as a body--not all of us, but some--coming together and talking about something that we can do federally with HEW helping.

Nathan: How were you drawn into this? Did somebody name you?

Asawa: One of the members--Seymour Yezner--is on the panel with me on the National Endowment Artists and Schools panel, and he was telling me that they were going to have this book conference in Minneapolis. He did mention something about multi-ethnic material that they were going to discuss with publishers. I just said to him that a lot has to be done, although I didn't really know specifically. So, they invited all the superintendents from all over the country and no one was coming from San Francisco, so they invited me.

But I didn't represent the school; I just went as an individual. Then after everybody spoke and the women's spokesman spoke up, then I spoke and I said, "Well, I guess I'm a minority of one, and I represent the artist in all of us." Then I said that "since I had the publishers here, I make a plea that you don't put out books on creativity and expect that to be the textbook for teaching art." Anyway, that's essentially what I said.

I felt it was too bad that none of us brought any texts or any materials that we had worked on. I thought that was a foolish thing--the publishers were there.

Asawa: But the next meeting they have will be that kind of thing, and the thing that they should do at all the meetings in the community would be, at book fairs, that there should be a specific area called multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and to show in textbooks the sex bias--girls do this and boys do that.

But I also said that you can't learn anything out of books. I mean, a lot of what is happening now with the young people is that they are not getting it out of the books, they keep thinking that if they would only read and write, then they will be able to do other things, but I think other things precede them.

Nathan: I see. Did you meet people who impressed you?

Asawa: Oh, yes. I was very impressed with them, very impressed. They were very much in tune with everything. That's what they all decided afterwards--that the only worthwhile thing was that we met some new people.

Can I make you some tea?

Nathan: That would be lovely. Thank you.

We were talking earlier about the kinds of art facilities that the next generation will want. Isn't it hard to try to predict what they are going to want? I do see a lot of campus people--young people--who seem to be interested in museums, dance, operas. But whether that's a big enough audience, I can't say.

Asawa: I think the thing that this generation has to invest in is really to try to preserve knowledge and information and skills simply by utilizing people--not so much in putting so much money in--I think it's important to have the production, because I think if we lose a grasp of that total production--

Nathan: This is an opera production?

Asawa: Yes. I think more people should be given a chance even to experience it in a small way. That's why I think it would be wonderful if schools would have a little opera, or have the experience of opera. I remember being in an operetta when I was in grade school. That didn't make me an opera fan, but I think that that experience is a marvelous thing because you understand and you respect the effort. So I think all of those things are very important to do, and I think it's important to bring people in who understand the big picture so that their skills aren't lost.

The reality of what's in the schools and the attention span and the direction, or the non-direction, is something that we all are going to have to cope with.

Nathan: Do you feel that in a sense the challenge is really not only to preserve and develop some of these forms, but to make sure there is more participation and more exploring?

Asawa: Yes, because I think that's one of the real problems--that even in a movement of cultural centers--even in a neighborhood--you set these places up, but then what you really need are people, and I think that if I had money, I would invest in people, in keeping them active.

Nathan: Do you feel these neighborhood centers tend to work toward that direction?

Asawa: I hope they do. I think that just the experience at Black Mountain in community living--it's very difficult to live together. And the only thing that made that place worthwhile was that these people were highly skilled and individually motivated. I think the community centers should try to get people who are extremely skilled and have something to contribute.

Nathan: There would be a very high quality of leadership or teaching in each center, to attract people?

Asawa: Yes. I really like the idea of having in a city a symphony, an opera, a ballet. But I think that we really have the problem that we're split; those in the neighborhood may not think that it's important. I think it's important but I think, as you say, we don't know what is going to be useful to the next generation--I mean, it's too bad if we had too many empty houses--like the Kabuki Theater, it's down, and the Chinese Cultural Center is sort of very quiet and inactive. We get all of the buildings together and we can't run them, and when the problem ends up being concerned with running them, then we don't have enough money to deal with the inside of it and the program. So I think that we have to be very careful.

Nathan: Yes. I see your point.

Bi-Centennial Selection Committee

Nathan: This may tie in a little (tell me if it does or not) with the Bi-Centennial plans.

Asawa: Everyone is hoping that the Bi-Centennial will bring the city together.

Nathan: Are there plans being developed now?

Asawa: Yes. Just two weeks ago, they re-established the Arts Committee, and Roberto Vargas is chairman; Milton Salkind was before. Now I think many organizations are going to come under that--the youth organization, education, neighborhood arts, and Fort Mason.

Nathan: I think it's the Bi-Centennial Arts Committee of the City of San Francisco. Is there anything that you would like to say about how it's going or what the plans would be?

Asawa: There have been a lot of meetings about it. I think the neighborhood people kept thinking it was being run by somebody up here--people in Pacific Heights, the financial district. The people didn't want that to happen; and yet, they didn't have the contact with the community. So the logical thing was to have the Neighborhood Arts program, because they're already in tune with the community. And hopefully, it will not go ethnic--I think all of it should be together, but it should not polarize and have each ethnic group saying they want their share and they want to do it this way, and have it in neighborhoods, primarily neighborhood projects. But when that is said by somebody in a Brooks Brothers suit, then it doesn't go over too well with the neighborhood people. But if they see it as a collective effort, then I think--they asked me to be on their selection committee of proposals, so that way, I'm sympathetic with both sides.

Nathan: Right. And you've never been known to wear a Brooks Brothers suit, either.

Asawa: [Laughter] That's right.

Nathan: Will the Bi-Centennial celebration have representation from a number of different art forms?

Asawa: Music, theatrical performances, dance, pageantry, parades from neighborhoods; they're talking about tree-planting; they're talking about beautification of neighborhoods; they're talking about schools. I'm trying to generate some interest in using the names of schools that relate historically to San Francisco's and U.S. history.

Nathan: You were saying I think that you were at Benjamin Franklin School?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: What are you doing at Benjamin Franklin?

Asawa: I'm just trying to set it up. I didn't mean to. I was hoping I would go there and be an artist, working on my work. I'm not so sure that it's possible, just realistically, because there are so many things that need to be done.

NEIGHBORHOOD BI-CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

Noe Valley Branch
San Francisco Public Library
451 Jersey Street
10 am to 4 pm

JULY 4, 1975

10:00 am MURAL PAINTING - Nancy ThompsonFront Fences
 FELTPEN PANELS - Ruth AsawaChildren's Room
 BREAD DOUGH SCULPTURE - Valerie FerrerAdult Room
 ORAL HISTORY TAPING - Roberta GreiferAdult Room
 COMMUNITY GARDEN SLIDE SHOW - Roy SwansonMeeting Room
 (continuous)

11:00 am NOE VALLEY VICTORIANS - Judy WaldhornMeeting Room
 (Slide Show & Walk)

11:30 am LIBRARY TREE PLANTING - Al LanierLibrary Front
 REMARKS - City Librarian Kevin StarrLibrary Front

12:00 noon PUPPET SHOW - "Kerin and the Spaghetti Monster"
 Joyus Puppet TheatreChildren's Room

1:00 pm BANNER MAKING - Valerie FerrerAdult Room
 NOE VALLEY VICTORIANS - Judy WaldhornMeeting Room
 (Slide Show & Walk)

2:00 pm PUPPET SHOW - "Kerin and the Spaghetti Monster"
 Joyus Puppet TheatreChildren's Room
 CHAPLIN and LAUREL & HARDY FILMS - Roberta GreiferMeeting Room

Plus MUSIC FACE PAINTING REFRESHMENTS

Sponsored by: Twin Bi-Centennial Youth/Education Committee
 Friends of Noe Valley
 San Francisco Public Library
 Friends of San Francisco Public Library



FREE



Asawa: The first project will be baker's clay involving the entire school, to bring people together first. Then the Black Light Explosion Company from the Neighborhood Arts Program--that's their area, so they would like to do something much more concrete within the schools. There's a city gardening project which we hope will eventually develop into a garden club in one of the empty lots there, but there is container gardening (which is inside) that could be done. But that has to be done with inside interest; a science teacher really has to take that on as his project, because that hasn't been successful where parents are outside and people come in and set something up and expect it to continue. It doesn't continue unless there's someone who truly knows gardening.

Nathan: I believe you said earlier that there was something to be learned from gardening--that there was a special benefit, I think you said, in the experience of gardening.

Asawa: Number one, it's a very small investment of material and it also teaches what is going to be pretty essential. I think gardening is possibly more important even than art; I mean, I wouldn't say one is more important than the other, but I think that gardening is something that we have completely lost and I think it's a very critical thing to learn, because it really does teach you respect.

And it's pretty miraculous when you think about it, when you think of a seed growing into a plant and then you eat it. It's just a real Nature's miracle there that we take for granted.

IX TIME AND THE ARTIST: WORKS, EXHIBITS, AWARDS

Beneficial Use of People

Nathan: Is your work on boards and commissions something you felt you wanted to evaluate as, let's say, compared to work in art? What does it do to the time you would otherwise perhaps have for your own art? Are you ready to make any evaluation of some of this work that you have been doing in the past few years?

Asawa: When all this is all over with, it will be much more important to be used as an artist rather than to be used on the boards and committees. I think we have to begin to do things that are beneficial--not necessarily profitable, but beneficial to people. If there were city jobs to be gardeners, it would be much more useful to the city than a lot of clerical work to deal with problems of the city.

I think that a lot of problem-solving comes out of real activity, and I think that that is one of the things that we know less about now than we ever did in history. People are used in a very useless way. And we keep thinking that by serving on a committee, serving on a commission or going into politics, by doing this we will get changes. And we hope that our vote will count and we hope that by signing a petition we'll make changes. Actually, a lot of people have made changes through this method, but in this process, we really lose what we value. That's a hard thing to explain, isn't it?

Nathan: What would be the alternative? We know that changes need to be made, and there are some drawbacks to the petition, voting, and governmental methods. So what would be an alternative that you might see? What else could we do?

Asawa: I think--and it may just be a personal desire--that I would like to do very simple things like make my evenings meaningful or my weekends meaningful. Maybe the thing that's happening--and this just occurred to me--is that I'm growing old, too, so that my needs are different

Asawa: from before. But actually, I've spent my younger years producing. I've spent 20 years producing, whether it's children or whether it's work. I spent those years, which I feel were very valuable.

And I would like to see young people have that opportunity to spend their time on that rather than on petitions, on committee meetings and fighting and serving. I mean, even like the Neighborhood Arts Program--a lot of young people's energy goes into doing social work, to try to help other people. Actually, they should be developing themselves into very strong people with developing ideas, so that they could be very useful and helpful with information.

That goes back to talking about how we use people. I was talking about an important way to use people is really to be [pause]--it's mixed up now.

Nathan: These are not easy ideas. I follow part of this. So you're thinking about the development of the individual as a strong and productive person?

Finding Satisfactions

Asawa: Like if a person has a family, the parents are struggling, are struggling--well, maybe to survive. They don't have time for finding satisfying responses. The thing is, there are very easy ways to be satisfied, and it's hard to find satisfaction. I mean, it's very easy to have pleasure eating with your family, and that's a very simple thing to do; there are many simple things to do that we don't know how to do anymore.

Nathan: It's the quality of life that you're talking about?

Asawa: Yes. It's so fractured now that it's very hard to--I was talking to a teacher yesterday. She said, "From the time I say something and it registers in the student's mind, it's very hard for them to understand what I'm saying." And even that is difficult. So when you get a body of intelligent people together (or so-called; a commission, I suppose, are supposed to be intelligent--maybe not always, but you're there for a reason), and they're making decisions, they're still influenced by where they come from; they still make very bad decisions.

I think that if I can make decisions on my own, I make much better decisions. My decisions are much stronger. I serve many more people by doing certain things. I'm trying to compare the making of the Fountain as compared to the years and years of decisions that I made on--and I always lost--on the Embarcadero Fountain, on

Asawa: the Chinese Bridge. I'm not interested in Yerba Buena; that's a great mistake. Well, I'm not looking at it from the hotel-businessman viewpoint. I look at it as sort of the living health of the city; I'm not talking about the business health of the city. And even, I think my judgment has still always been that whatever I decided to do, it still benefited people. Whether I made money or not money on it is sort of immaterial. I struggled with that after. But decisions that I had made have really been decisions for the welfare of the city. I'm not saying that I'm a social worker; I'm just saying that just being an artist is a much more useful function for me than serving on a committee, because that's always watered down.

Nathan: That's very interesting. I can see, from an artist's point of view, how what you have becomes a little diffused when you're working in a group.

Asawa: And I think there are a lot of people who could do that--make those decisions.

Nathan: Perhaps, but they wouldn't be you and they wouldn't know what you know, and they wouldn't have your interests. It's tough. There should be several of you [laughing] but there's only one.

Asawa: I just think it's really very easy to be an artist.

Nathan: It's impossible for most people, I think. It's very rare.

Asawa: Maybe it is; I don't know. But I think that it's important for artists to show how to be an artist.

Nathan: Exactly. Yes.

Asawa: I mean, I think that that's really my function.

Nathan: Maybe there's a little bit of an artist in each person, but not a complete one.

Asawa: I think that you're born with all the tools. If you grow up normally--I don't think one person has more than the other; the ingredients are there. That's why I think that the contact you have with people is a very important thing. And I think that that's the tragedy in the schools--that there are not enough--

Nathan: People?

Asawa: No. There are plenty of people in the school system. We've set up a system that doesn't allow people to function, and I think that that's the great tragedy of our schools. People are willing to fit into those boxes; the minute they don't, then they get somebody somehow who will.

Nathan: The tyranny of the structure.

Asawa: Yes, yes. We're all victims. Can't you see?

Nathan: Of course.

Asawa: All these good people!

Nathan: This is part of the problem--you have got to tinker with the structure, and I suppose that's where the voting and the petitions and the wheel-spinning and the meetings come in, because you can't do it if the structure doesn't work. You have to hack away at the structure, I suppose?

Asawa: Well, I think that that's what the young people are doing. They're walking out of it, and they're grating it and they're scraping it and they're knocking it down; that's what they're doing. And then people in the structure keep replacing it, and they put the wood up and that gets broken, and they put up fiberglass, and now they're designing it without windows, so that now, everybody who walks in it can't see out anymore.

Nathan: That's the new school design?

Asawa: That's right. School design is a wall and interior lighting--McAteer is that way--or even skylights but no windows. So it still keeps this oppression with them, and it's very easy to open it up.

Nathan: It takes a little courage to do that.

Asawa: Well, that's an element that we're all born with too. That doesn't mean that one person is given more; it depends on who uses it. I mean, it's what part of you that you decide to use. We've gotten so that we use so little of ourselves that we're really becoming more and more incompetent. I really know very little about how it happened but I know where to go to get something done if I need it. That's why I think it's important to use people in their own skilled area and make them function. We don't do that in our schools; we don't do that in government; we don't even do it with our families.

Even with reading, getting back to that meeting in Minneapolis, I said that a lot of the children who could read well don't read. It happens to be that reading doesn't take place in the home, so that where they're good readers, they read at home or parents read to their children. Nobody really faces up to that, because I think that's the reality of it.

Nathan: How would you reach back into the homes so that parents who were not readers would read?

Asawa: The thing is that we're really becoming less and less readers; we're more visually oriented and that's why the visual arts are so important.

Artist as Commissioner

Nathan: I see. And now are you thinking you'd like to say a little more about the question of--

Asawa: About being on commissions? Well, the thing that to me is interesting right now is that we've always had commissions, and for the first time we're inviting artists to be on them. And I think that's the reason that being there interests me. And they've always had superintendents of this, or so-and-so of this, or director of that, to represent. I mean, when you think of it, the Endowment began with people who, in a way, were not all artists. Even now, there are very few artists even on the Artists in Schools panel, except those who have worked in the program as artists. But I don't want to be swallowed into that either, because they get caught in there and then they organize a program. They were originally poets, and they got into this and they had a bigger idea of how it should be done. Then they got drawn into that, and finally--

Nathan: They're not poets anymore?

Asawa: They're not poets anymore; they're commissioners.

Nathan: That is very well put. Can you keep your integrity as an artist, or whatever you are originally, and still function as a member of a body?

Asawa: That would be a pretty unique thing to do. But, at the same time, I feel that all this is very important. I'm not saying that one should just be an artist, but that one should also be a member of the community.

Activity and Family

Nathan: Very good. You said earlier, in passing, that you would like to make your evenings meaningful, or your weekends meaningful. What were you thinking of?

Asawa: I'm just looking back on how I used to spend my evenings. When the children were growing up, I spent a lot of time with them and took them to the beach, the museum, the park. And then in the evenings,

Asawa: I worked. I would work until midnight or two or whatever. We worked a lot on the house, which is still unfinished. I think that was a very nice period, and I would like that spirit or that quality of evening activity to be possible again--instead of going to a night meeting here and a school board meeting here, and fighting this and dashing off before dinner--all of that. You're doing it for your family, and in the end you destroy what you're trying to achieve; you lose something, or you take something of that away.

Nathan: It is just a permanent dilemma.

Asawa: Yes. At the same time, I'm concerned with old age and what one does when one grows old and is all alone, and then what happens. I'm speaking of different periods in life, but having been active when you're young, you generally remain active as you get older too. [Pause] I haven't faced that quite yet.

Experience and Memory

Nathan: No. But that's the human problem. Is there a danger that if you don't practice your art, it escapes you?

Asawa: Yes. Absolutely. You can lose everything. You can rebuild it. That's why I think it's important that it happen while you're young, because you can have a memory of it. But it's also important for young people to be in contact with people who are actually doing that. They won't understand it when they're young, but when they arrive at the time when they're going to produce something or do something, they will have had that memory, experience or example, to understand that.

And that's why I'm just saying, from a parent's point of view, that the experience of my working in the house on my work was a very good lesson for my children; some will take it, some won't take it. But I think having had that, they understand how to put a house together, they understand you get up at seven and you work until four or five. They understand certain habits--working habits. If you tend to wake up after the kids have gone to school, you set a pattern for them to follow when they're grown up. I think those are the things that I keep thinking about. I'm not talking about my behavior, but I'm talking about certain habits that I would like to try to help develop in them.

I don't say that you only influence your own family, but I think that whatever you do--like, if you run off and help other people out here and you neglect your own children--I think that that's not right. I don't feel that I've done it, but I feel very much, being out in the community, that you do sacrifice something personally. Don't you think in some ways?

Nathan: I think it's a very fine line, to do justice to both.

Asawa: That's right.

Nathan: Very difficult. In some ways, the more giving you are and the better you are, the more people will grab you to do what they're interested in.

Asawa: It's really hard to sort out what is essential and what is really helpful, and when you're being used for some purpose.

Nathan: Yes. When you speak of each person's highest and best use, that applies to you also. That's very thoughtful, and I think many people struggle with it and maybe always will. I don't know whether you can always say, "All right. I'll give so many years for this and so many years for this." Sometimes it has to all go on at the same time.

Asawa: And there are ways in which you can stack things too, and I think that if you do one thing that will help many people, that's an ideal situation.

Nathan: Right. In a way, an artist has a special opportunity.

Asawa: The artist is the one that can do that most efficiently.

Winning a Poster Contest

Nathan: I did want, if you're willing, to think of some of the exhibits--some of your shows and some of the awards--not particularly give a list of them, because that's easy enough to do. If you would care to, would you talk about what any of them have meant to you? Were there any that somehow gave you a special boost or inspiration to go in a certain direction, that somehow seem particularly significant to you?

Asawa: Well, I won a poster contest in the seventh or eighth grade.

Nathan: Ah! Now that is interesting. What was the poster?

Asawa: Liberty. Gee, I can't remember what it was. It was sponsored by the bank or the post office or something that had to do with the United States. And I painted the Statue of Liberty.

Nathan: What colors?

Asawa: I can't remember it. I think it had a red background. I really can't remember, but I just remember that. Also, I had certain people--an art teacher, both in elementary and high school--grammar school and high school. Then--it's all in the catalog--but I remember having been interned and having that opportunity really to work side-by-side with professional artists who were also interned at the time. They turned to teaching because there was a shortage of teachers. Not all children responded to it (but I'm talking about those who may not have had the opportunity, or who were too afraid). It has to do with a combination of being too afraid of being out there and not being secure enough financially. Many reasons, many things enter into it.

But I think that since we are going to the welfare state anyway, whether you work as a civil servant, you have all these benefits, or you work in the school district and you get all these benefits, or wherever you are, we're moving in the direction of security, such security that I don't think that young people should be concerned with their future. There's always going to be a job somewhere out there. That's why I think the schools should be a time when we can explore and experiment and make mistakes. Then, there will be less likelihood of a person feeling compelled to go into a secure job later on.

College Exhibit

Asawa: Then, when I was in college, I had a painting selected for a college exhibit at Addison Gallery, Massachusetts. A man from Holland bought the painting and then later on gave it to the Addison Gallery. It's a small, little painting that I did--oil on blotter paper.

Nathan: Oil on blotter paper?

Asawa: That's how Albers worked. It was a very quick way for the paper to absorb the oil and make it mat. A lot of his early things are done on blotting paper. Then that show was reviewed in Time magazine, and I think they mentioned my painting in that. That was in '48.

The First Wire Sculptures

Nathan: And there were the wire sculptures?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Those were the first--

Asawa: The first exhibit I had in 1954 in New York. Also, Philip Johnson bought a piece. And then in the second show, others bought--Howard and Jean Lipman. And then the Lipmans gave theirs to the Whitney.

Asawa: Then out of that, works were sent to the Art Institute in Chicago, and they used it on the cover of that catalog.

Nathan: Yes, I've seen that.

Asawa: So really nice things happened having had the show, but I didn't make any money on those; it all went into shipping and announcements, the cost of printing.

Nathan: Does the artist have to bear the cost of the catalog?

Asawa: No, not the catalog, but the announcements; they had to put something into it. And the shipping, of course, from here it's tremendous.

Fine Arts Award, AIA

Nathan: You said earlier that you are going to Washington because you got an AIA award?

Asawa: Yes. That's for the Fine Arts award.

Nathan: Oh. Was it for a specific work?

Asawa: Well, I think primarily for art in public places, art and architecture, so that I think maybe the Ghirardelli Fountain and the Hyatt Fountain are probably the reasons for this award.

Nathan: That's very lovely, isn't it?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: So, it's really, in a sense, for a group of contributions rather than one specific item?

Asawa: Well, yes. I think there are awards for architects for specific buildings or specific planning, you know, cities. This was, I think, a general Fine Arts award. Last year, Harry Bertoia got it. He's a sculptor. And then the year before, George Rickey, who's a sculptor. And then the year before that, I think, Richard Lippold, who's also a sculptor.

Nathan: Well, it looks like you're the first woman to come along too.

Asawa: Oh, I think it's time. I guess it's because I'm a minority and I'm a woman.

Nathan: [Laughter] I think the quality of your work has something to do with it! I don't think it's all calculated quite like that.

Museum Show and Peridot Gallery

Asawa: Then, I guess my first show was a four-man show, or four-woman show I should say now.

Nathan: Four-person?

Asawa: Four-person show. [Laughter] Goodness me! It's confusing. At the San Francisco Museum in 1954. My husband designed it, and then he and Dan Grae, who's the husband of Ida Grae, installed it. It was a show with Merry Renk, Marguerite Wildenhein, Ida Grae and myself. That's when Grace Morley was still there. It was published in the Arts and Architecture, that show.

Then a gallery from New York saw it and contacted me to represent me in New York. It was the Peridot Gallery. They had a very small gallery, and so everything was quite limited; I had about three shows there in 1954, '56, '58. I decided that I wasn't interested in sending things to New York, although they sold my work, and many nice things happened out of that first show: Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller (the first one) came and bought a piece and Mrs. John D. III brought a piece out of that show. These were sculptures; it was only a sculpture show. And subsequently I wanted to do a show of drawings with my sculpture and the gallery felt that they had built up an image of me as a sculptor; they didn't want to cloud the issue. So they refused to show my drawings, which I thought was too bad.

Reflections on Design Offers

Asawa: Way before then--'52--La Verne Originals, which was a fabric and wallpaper designer, wanted to subsidize me--retain me to do work--and I was supposed to sort of mass-produce and they would do it the way Knoll Associates did it with Bertoia. As I said, before, I decided I didn't want to go that fast at that time. It meant that it would have disrupted my whole family. I don't know what would have happened, but I just didn't want that. Just as a company here wanted to pay for a housekeeper who would keep my house and everything and take care of the children so I could work, which was very tempting, but I didn't take that either.

I don't know if I would do it now, but I don't think I would do it--I mean, if I were young and starting, because I've seen a lot of people who did that. They're burned out and they're used and used until, by the time they're about 35 or 40, they're used up.

Asawa: I didn't really want to go into advertising, mass producing. I tried a few of those things; they were disastrous. We did wallpaper designs, and in an effort to see how we could make a living by ourselves. In all of those things, it was better to do baby-sitting at night, or do menial work or clean somebody's house; it was much better for me to do that than to pursue that.

I think that's the danger; that's why I'm thinking about it. In a way, you have to be sort of stubborn, or pretty much know what you really want.

Nathan: And what looks like success really might not be?

Albers, Color and Relationships

Asawa: I think it's just a very temporary thing. I think one of the reasons that I felt this way was that I had direct contact and experience with people like Albers. At that time, he was 55 or 60, when I knew him at school. He was still working; he was still not recognized on 57th Street. He wasn't like Hans Hofmann or all the other contemporaries.

To have seen how a single person produced and worked on an idea was to me very impressive.

Nathan: That was what you saw him do?

Asawa: Yes. He worked in an area that no one had ever worked on. He was primarily interested in color and the relativity of color, relationship of color, and to show that color is not fixed; it's relative to what's next to it. A color will change with its neighbor.

And he always talked about the same thing--that people change, depending on who their neighbors are; people are very relative also. The ability to relate this way and to change is really a life problem. So it was very interesting how all these things always connected. He talked about color, which has no life, and becomes life with whatever is its neighbor.

The other thing was that he related Taoism and the oriental philosophy very much with black and white, white and black, and showing that even black will change, or greys will change or whites will change, and that it's much better to be flexible than to be rigid. It's very exciting. I don't know if everybody looked at it that way, but this is how I interpreted it.

Nathan: It's as though things and people exist only in context?

Asawa: Yes. So it's a very important life problem.

Nathan: Wasn't there a water color of yours in that show at the San Francisco Museum? You had your wire sculpture and the clay figures and some water colors. And there was one--was it a chair?--that was defined by what wasn't there?

Asawa: Yes. That was one of the problems that he gave in school, was never to see anything in isolation; that you can define space and you can define an object by defining the space around it. When he talked about painting, he always talked about a bowl of fruit, and he was always talking about the shadow between this fruit and that fruit and this fruit. By defining this little space in here, you would define three objects. He was always saying, "Use as little paint as you can." Even the way he used his own paints, he squeezed his paints out, only what he was going to use.

I didn't inherit that kind of discipline, but anyway, all these things impressed me very much. He applied it to the lines that he used, or the color that he used; he used it in every way--in the way he lived (he lived very simply). I think all of those things are important, and they're doubly important because they not only taught something in art but they also taught something in attitudes about living too.

Evolution of Tied-Wire Sculpture

Asawa: Going back to the exhibits, I had my first one-man show at the de Young Museum in 1960, and that was a combination of drawings and sculpture. I showed about the same drawings two or three years later at the San Francisco Museum, and then I introduced the tied-wire sculptures here; that was in '62.

Nathan: How did the tied-wire sculptures evolve from this sort of interest?

Asawa: Actually, it was just sort of an accident, because our late friend who was a photographer--Paul Hassel--and his wife, Ginny, went on a trip to Death Valley--the Mojave Desert or Death Valley; I can't remember. Is Mojave Desert and Death Valley the same?

Nathan: I'm embarrassed to say, but I really don't know where they are, but I'll look them up. [The Mojave Desert is in Southern California; Death Valley is in Eastern California.]

Asawa: Anyway, they brought me a plant back to draw. In trying to draw it and following the tangle of the branches, I just decided that maybe I should sort of take a bunch of wire and try to make it. As I divided it, I could draw it; then I'd draw the next thing and the next thing, and it just came out that way. Then I began to see all of the possibilities: opening up the center and then making it flat on the wall, and putting it on a stand. You can go on and on with it. Then, I haven't done it yet, but I would like to use faceted glass, if I can get somebody to do the faceted glass in the--(gestures).

Nathan: I see--oh, yes.

Asawa: That may be sort of busy work, but I think that it could develop into a new way of putting glass together.

Nathan: When this is done--when it's hanging there--will it have much more glass in it?

Asawa: Oh, yes. The attempt would be to have glass going in all directions, coming from this way and this way.

Nathan: Have you ever worked with glass, other than--

Asawa: Not really. I did those up there (points to windows in her house), but it's partially painted and partially, I was trying to do something with bottle glass--finding a way to use it so that we could make a use of all the garbage that we throw away and that you find on the street.

Nathan: Do you have other thoughts about things you want to try in addition to this faceted glass in wire sculpture? Are there other things coming in your mind?

Asawa: What I've done is I've used resin at the tips. I've also melted the tips--heated and melted little metal balls on the tips. You know how, in the winter, how the water hangs loose on pine needles and branches? I've done that so that it looks like water, or it's just to simulate that. And then all these circles in the light reflects all the colors.

Curiosity About Materials

Nathan: I see. And would you like to do more watercolor or more oils?

Asawa: Oh, yes. My favorite time is when I'm doing watercolors. I studied to be a painter; I never studied sculpture. I'm actually very ignorant about real sculpture--about the use of clay and modeling

Asawa: and all that. But I think my main curiosity is with the materials; how to use materials in their own natural way, like paper, like all the paper-folding. This comes directly out of Albers' design classes; it's just an extension. Taking that paper, and casting in concrete, in vacuum forming it in plastic, and then casting it in bronze--like this [shows piece of sculpture].

Nathan: Isn't that handsome?

Asawa: Now, I'm working on a proposal for a fountain for the [San Francisco] Japanese Center, and it's going to be done in paperfold and cast either in concrete or steel, if we can get the steel.

Nathan: You start with the paperfold, for shaping on, and then you cast it?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: Are you doing that because the paper folding is very close to the Japanese culture?

Asawa: Yes. I think it would be very nice because it would be related to their tradition.

Nathan: This is so nice to handle.

Asawa: The original thought was that if I could get a wall--a vertical wall--that would be done with paperfold.

Nathan: What an elegant idea! So this is something that you're working on right now?

Asawa: I've been working on it since I was in school, in '49 and '47. I've been thinking about all these ideas--taking one simple element and carrying that idea through many, many materials and finally coming out with a new form, rather than going and getting a pattern made in wood--just to simply efficiently make them out of paper.

Nathan: Somehow it would be nice to have--maybe next to it or near it, maybe in a case--an exhibit of the steps.

Asawa: That's what I wanted the show to be. I wanted the show at the museum to be like that.

S.F. Museum Retrospective

Nathan: Which show is this?

Asawa: This was the San Francisco Museum retrospective show last year. I wanted to kind of show the process, not so much to show the best example of this period. I really wanted to take the original--the clay raw, and then shape a mould in wax, and then shape the bronze.

That would have been a very, very interesting show. It would not have been a museum show, but a very interesting show for people to have.

Nathan: Yes. I thought that the one you did have was a lovely show. I walked around for a while, looked and listened to what people said. There was a man who thought he had to explain each piece to people; [laughing] he was a volunteer.

Asawa: How nice.

Nathan: It was charming because he was devoted to the objects and he wanted you to see what was so fine about each one. There was a little girl about three or four who was calling her mother, "Come and look at the Christmas tree." It was one that hung from the ceiling and it had this feeling about it, in the larger and larger circumferences of the branches. Very personal. People got attached to things and they would just stand there and they wouldn't leave.

Asawa: Actually, what we're talking about is just an entirely different show. But I actually had enough work to carry through from this form to the next form to the next form, so that on a much more developed level, it did happen. It did happen with the show chronologically and that was the intent of the curator, Gerald Nordland, who curated and organized it.

Nathan: Yes.

Asawa: Because he went from the simple one, then the next and the next, and you could see the development of the idea, and this other one would have been just a technical development. I don't know of anything else that I've done. I had the same show in Pasadena. It was only part of this show here.

Filming a Program

Nathan: Right. I was just glancing at another note about Buckminster Fuller's son-in-law who wanted to do a film. Is this going to come about, or has it happened?

Asawa: He had applied to the Endowment for it, and we were using my grant from the San Francisco Foundation as a match to do it. It all came about because Mr. Fuller wanted his son-in-law to do a film on me. I felt that it's sort of hard to separate it, and I felt that I wasn't so sure that that was as important as filming the program. So, the idea came about that maybe something could be done more efficiently by doing both of them at the same time.

Nathan: This would be the program in the schools?

Asawa: Yes--the Alvarado Program. I don't want that program to be about me in the schools; I want it to be the program, and then I could be part of it. But the whole essential thing of how it's spread has to do with a number of people working with me on it. We have a parent who is coordinating the film--talking and planning and selecting the places where things would be happening.

Nathan: I see. And is this going to happen fairly soon?

Asawa: Actually, they're coming up here on the second, third and fourth of November. It's the end of a show that Fuller is having at the L.A. County Museum. I don't know whether it's the science museum or whether it's the county museum; he's having a exhibit of his work. So he will be up here and they will do some filming. And they will also do some filming in the school.

Nathan: And how will this film be used?

Asawa: That part I really don't know anything about. Hopefully, it will be used in schools.

Additional Awards (1976)

Nathan: Since we talked last, I know you've had additional awards and recognition. We did attend that Council for Civic Unity dinner in your honor. I know you don't like to talk about this, but it's part of the record. Have you had some more?

Asawa: I had this thing with women, in celebration of the International Women's Year, the San Francisco Women's Round Table.

Nathan: And it has that symbol in the middle.

Asawa: I guess that's a woman's symbol, isn't it?

Nathan: Yes. And then this is simply a--it's hard to find a sculptor to do something for you, I would imagine.

Asawa: This was done by C.B. Johnson, and it was sponsored by--you know the group, with Pat Montandon--a group of civic minded women, and the U.N. (United Nations) Association also co-sponsored it.

Nathan: It's lovely. You're getting quite a collection there on top of the piano. Your American Institute of Architects award and--

Asawa: I think it's a lot of effort for nothing, really.

Nathan: It probably makes them feel good too.

Asawa: Well, maybe.

Fountain at the Japanese Center (1976)

Nathan: You had mentioned very briefly that you're doing new fountains for the Japanese Center, is that right?

Asawa: Yes. The fountains are completed. We're just waiting for it to weather, and then to put it in.

Nathan: What will they be like? Like any others that you've done before?

Asawa: No, it's an experiment, like every fountain's been. I don't know how successful it'll be, but as we said before, it's based on paper fold--origami--and it was fabricated in Corten steel, Shrader Iron Works. Corten steel--it's the kind that rusts, the steel that rusts. It's used on highway guard rails.

Nathan: You want that texture, is that it?

Asawa: Well, we considered copper but copper was out of the question; it was too expensive. I'd never worked in Corten, so I thought I'd try it. That's not the steel that we used, but that's sort of a trade name that's well known; everybody knows what that means when you say that.

Nathan: This paperfold interest goes back to your Black Mountain experience, doesn't it?



1976

Addie Laurie Lanier holding model for Buchanan Mall Fountain, Nihon
Machi, San Francisco.

*Photograph by Ed Tin
Used by permission*





1976

Fountains to be sand-blasted. Sheet metal fountains for Buchanan Mall, Nihon Machi, San Francisco.

*Photograph by Ed Tin
Used by permission*



Asawa: Yes, and it goes back to my childhood too when, as a child, we learned to make little things in paper.

Then when I went to Black Mountain and Albers brought it from the Bauhaus, which is from the whole western approach--European approach--then I was really interested in it because it brought my past into the present. I've been interested in it, and I've cast paper in concrete, in bronze and steel and plaster and plastic. So I've sort of always been interested in the concept of the economy of a piece of paper--going from a flat piece of paper into a structure. So I think that there are many possibilities with it now; I'd like to explore that further.

Nathan: Do you get a three-dimensional effect?

Asawa: Oh, yes. It's just like a big fan. It has sort of the quality of a chrysanthemum or a flower, has that kind of look about it; not quite, but sort of the idea of a symmetrical thing. I thought it should be something that would be related.

We also are making the ends of the benches out of dough and casting them into concrete. We now have the rubber molds made. I had about eight people that were sort of connected to that street--children come--and they've made a few things on it. My daughter Aiko and I have done the bulk of it, but there are pieces that they've made for it. There are about nine benches, and they will be Epoxied into the ends of those benches.

Nathan: Where will this be located?

Asawa: At Buchanan and Post, between Post and Sutter. Buchanan Street has become a mall; it's closed off to traffic and all those stores front on this plaza. This is the group of Japanese owners that fought redevelopment and did manage to work with redevelopment on getting this; otherwise, they would have gone the way the Japan Trade Center went. This group resisted. It's been a long struggle.

Nathan: What a very interesting way for this to come up!

Asawa: This is a redevelopment project, with a very low budget for the sculpture. There was money for sculpture. They needed a Japanese for it.

Nathan: Is this part of that one percent or two percent for art?

Asawa: No, no. This has to do with a federal project. It's federal monies that are in this.

Nathan: I see. Is this something unusual, that federal money is used in this way--any federal money is used?

Asawa: No, I think that there is money--I don't know what percentage it is--that's used for art.

Nathan: When do you think this will be ready?

Asawa: Probably February. Next month. It was supposed to be done in December. Now they want to have it ready for the Spring festival.

Nathan: When is that?

Asawa: Sometime in April. Cherry blossom.

Nathan: That's lovely. Will there be jets in the fountain?

Asawa: No, no. It's going to be very little water. The owners are very concerned that there are going to be extra expenses; they're very concerned with that because they have to foot the bill for water. So it's just a little trickle--hardly any water.

Nathan: And then do they pump the water back?

Asawa: Yes. We have two pumps. We have two sculptures for the price of one. [Laughter] Instead of one, they wanted two. We had to stretch it, so we had to economize. It's a little lean.

Nathan: So there are two fountains?

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: It's always the artist who gets the squeeze, somehow.

Asawa: Yes. The artist always pays for the privilege of doing it.

The Hyatt Fountain

Nathan: You were just talking about being spread out and feeling the need to produce.

Asawa: There are two things I think--you either isolate yourself when you produce, or you try to find some vehicle to be productive and make use of the resources around you. I think that was one of the reasons I did the fountain; I thought maybe I'd have a chance to do that. It nearly killed me, but it actually worked out fine.

Nathan: This is the Hyatt Fountain?

Asawa: Yes.



1972

Assembling the Hyatt Fountain in the Lanier
back yard. Paul Lanier on the frame.

*Photograph by Laurence J. Cuneo, Jr.
Used by permission*



Nathan: And you were doing what? You were bringing people together?

Asawa: Yes. I was still working in the schools. I was trying to stay involved in the schools. I didn't want to say, "Well, I'm going to take two years away and I'm going to work on my work." So by doing this and by really involving the people around me, so that I let them work with me, that way I just stayed in and really did both. Hopefully, there are other ways in which that can happen; that can happen with everything, really.

X PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

The Need to be Productive

Asawa: There is an imbalance now in our society or our community--the hunger that people have, and there's a gap between what people want and their ability to produce it. You know what I'm saying.

Nathan: I think so. What is it that they want that they can't produce? You're not speaking about possessions, are you?

Asawa: No--just the ability to be productive. I'm not saying an object at the end, but to be productive. People hate their work, eight hours a day. They're so exhausted, they come home, sit down and relax, have a beer, and there's not the ability to make those eight hours productive. That's what I'm talking about.

But then there is such a need. Everybody is just really searching for something, right? The young people are trying to search for something on the streets--ability or a commune or whatever it is--we have all these search parties going on all over the place. [Laughter] And nothing is really solid. Of course, we feel secure in those things that are established, that are good and are sound.

But I don't like the idea of being root-bound; I like the idea of being really flexible and able to fly here and there and be free to do things because I think that really is the spirit of modern life and modern technology--just everything. We shouldn't be root-bound. This is something that [Buckminster] Fuller is always talking about. Everybody is moving; everybody's moving across the continent and around the earth.

I always say to him--if everybody is traveling and somebody has to stay home, I'd like to be the one that stays home. Then, people would come through and drop by and see me instead of my having to go somewhere else. But I think the thing is that although we know all of this--and we have the Xerox machine and we have the tape recorder and we have all the machinery to make things much more

Asawa: efficient, and the IBM, and we punch a few buttons and they know whether you haven't paid your last month's water bill. They punch like this [clap] and they see your records--you're six months behind. And then, you're in a store and they know whether your bank account is good. I mean, they have fantastic ways to record everything and to know exactly where we're at. And yet, we're bogged down--we're tied down so badly by rules and regulations. The kids are not going to stay in this anymore; they're going to destroy the place. And people have to move quickly to know how to do that, and they refuse to change. (I'm getting off the subject, aren't I?)

Nathan: No, I don't think so.

The Dinosaur Problem

Asawa: I was just telling this friend, when I begin to deal with organizations or institutions or government or whatever, you just have a feeling that all this is really becoming extinct and obsolete. I try to parallel it with what happened to the dinosaur. [Laughter] I was saying that he had very little brain and a great big body, and the tail can't come back and hit the head in any way cause it's so heavy, it's holding the body up.

We're victims of this great big body. That's why, in a way--I don't want to get caught in that whole thing. I told him I'd rather be the insect that's buzzing around [laughter] and flying all over. There's too little brain and too much body.

Nathan: How can we change that balance, do you think?

Asawa: I think that is an individual responsibility. That's something that you can't say: 'Well, there's going to be a law that says this and this.' If I follow that pattern that everybody fits into, then I would have to stop. When I was producing a work, I would put in about an 18 or 20 hour day. Between taking care of the family and doing whatever I had to do around and doing my work, it was about an 18 to 20 hour day. So that's really using up your 24 hours very well.

Nathan: Can you survive with only four hours of sleep at night?

Asawa: I sleep in between. I used to nap while the kids were playing. I'd go out and they'd be playing in the sandbox and I would take a little nap. I could do that. It's not that you have to sleep eight hours; that's just a habit that we have. I'm not saying that I do that now.

Asawa: If each one of us decided that we were going to put in eight hours a day--eight hours of work every day--then we would need fewer workers in certain areas, and then we could have this body of money to do other things that are productive. That's what I'm saying; we misuse ourselves and we allow ourselves to be misused, by the system. The system says, "Okay, we get a vacation here; we get a holiday here." We just love it because it's our day off and we get paid for it anyway. And if I were in the swing of it, then I would certainly love it too because then I'd have a day off and I'd get paid for not doing anything. I think about those things. I don't really like to do that, because in a way, I feel as though I'm on vacation all the time anyway, while I'm doing what I'm doing. It doesn't really matter whether I get a day off or not. I think it's the separation of what you're doing and what you like to do. I think that people have to begin to bring these things together.

The young people are seeing it. They want to do what they want to do. Pretty soon, I guess, if we keep it up, I guess we're all going to. I don't know where we're going to be in terms of taking care of ourselves. The thing is, I'm not advocating an overthrow of government or anything like that; I'm just saying that if you're in a rigid form of government, that government should actually be responsible for what it should do. Talking to Elio [Benvenutti] at the festival, and he said, "It takes twice as many men to do the same amount of work that we got done ten years ago because people are weaker, physically weaker; they cannot lift--" You know, that really hit me because it means that we are not producing a top quality person out of the system that we're operating, although we keep talking about benefits and we talk about improving man's situation and all that. We're actually destroying the individual's ability to make decisions and ability to carry on and be independent. Don't you think?

Nathan: That certainly gives me pause. Even the sort of "word business."

Asawa: The word business--the typist or the clerical or the secretary.

Nathan: About half the students who came to Cal--this is a lot--couldn't write well enough to pass the Subject A Examination. So it means, we're not doing that well, teaching people to write, we're not helping people to be physically strong, we're not helping them to be creatively strong--it does make you think.

Asawa: It goes right down the line, all the way down the line. That's a very scary prospect for the future.

Nathan: Do you feel that artists are more aware of this problem than other groups?

Asawa: No, I don't think the artists are any better off.

Nathan: I would like to generalize from you, but I don't think it's possible. Because you see this, I wondered whether you felt other artists also did.

Asawa: Personally, I am trying to think of the people that I would most like to be around--not for a long time, but--I like to be around people who have information, like the welder, like a cabinet-maker.

Nathan: You mean physical information?

Asawa: Yes--physical information. In terms of what I do, I don't like to be around people who are talking about ideas; that doesn't interest me. I mean, I shouldn't say it doesn't interest me; I think it's important. But it has to be a combination of people who have skills. Even a plumber who has information, who has a skill, who can produce. Do you know what I'm saying?

Teachers are collectively a very uninteresting group. I would say, collectively, that a group of artists are much more interesting people, and I've found that they're much more generous than most groups. Maybe it's because they have been so oppressed, or they're not recognized, that they have to work much harder for any kind of reaction.

Nathan: You think it has made them more sensitive to other people, and to what they need?

Asawa: Yes. At the same time, they're sometimes more opinionated and are much more petty. Human qualities are much stronger, but at least they react.

Nathan: You give me the impression that you think they're more alive in some way than other groups?

Asawa: They're more terrible [laughter] and they're more wonderful too. They're more whatever quality we have.

Nathan: More intensely whatever. That's lovely. At least they're not just kind of grey and blah.

Asawa: I shouldn't generalize. There are a lot of people who are--and I'm dull, except when I'm talking about my subject. Socially, I don't have very much to talk about. I talk about what you do, this and that, you talk too. But when the subject that I'm interested in comes up, then I can really speak.

Nathan: It's sort of like the human use of human beings?

Asawa: I'm interested in each person using himself at a higher level. Not to me, but to himself. That's a very important thing. I think that only by doing this can organizations begin to function, because to restructure the Art Commission or Department of Recreation or restructure the city government or restructure the schools, that's just spinning wheels all over again. But, if you can take those same people in there and make them refocus on themselves--

Nathan: Do you think you could have some sort of in-service training? Can people really change?

Asawa: No. People can't really change any more than I want to be changed by somebody. I don't want people to change me; I would like the opportunity to do things more. The danger of in-service like that is they come looking for an idea; they can use it themselves.

Personal Responsibility

Nathan: And if you could do whatever you wanted?

Asawa: If I could do whatever I wanted, gee, I would try to make people want to do things for themselves. That's a very hard thing to do. I mean, to really make them make decisions about just simply what they wear, what they have around them, that they even are responsible for what they do. We always live in a mess, but I never throw trash on the street. That's number one. When I can, I pick it up--other people's trash. And we're all guilty of it: we all put our cigarette butt out in the lobby while we're waiting and crunch it on [the floor]. All those things no one thinks about; I'm thinking about very simple things that each one of us must become conscious of, that we ourselves can do something about. I'm not talking about big government; I'm talking about each one of us. Like our planters out there [along the street], they pull everything out. So, we haven't planted anything. We're going to get kind of a grill so that we can keep the dogs out. We had to make a fence because the dogs chopped everything up, and we still had dogs coming from the other side.

I'm just saying that if we took care of our own pets and we took care of a tree in front or we swept occasionally in front of our house, we can live however we want within our own home. I think whatever is public property, we begin to become conscious of. If we eat in the cafeteria, there's no reason why we couldn't pick up our empty dishes and put them there or stack them for whoever is working. All these things are just simple human considerations that

Asawa: don't take time out of our day to do. I'm just talking about very simple-minded things. That's one example; you could go into deeper and deeper things.

The reason we put those trees out there was not just for ourselves, but we hoped the whole neighborhood would enjoy them. And we put those planters out there hoping we'd have flowers. We had them, and they rip them off; they take plants. It's like, not pulling somebody else's plants out or--

Nathan: Of course.

Asawa: And those things have to come from inside you--to desire to do that.

Nathan: I wonder how you get inside people enough to get them started?

Asawa: I would say that if people had the experience of a garden. That's why gardening comes back, and you have a respect for having done it yourself, and you have a respect for painting a mural on the wall--you have a respect for having done it and you want other people to respect it. These are the reasons that all of these things have a value, because I think that if we do that, experience is important.

It's not to make artists out of people, but since you're doing it, if you're doing it, then you should get the finest artists to work so that you have not only potentially teaching skills at the highest level, but you're also teaching all the other things. Somebody has to organize and supervise it, and you should have somebody who's skilled, that's interested in people, who has certain qualities, two qualities: that is, not just an artist who feels that he's an artist, but the sort of person who's interested in people too. I think that that's what I mean; you can stack it, you can stack things. The more things, the more abilities each one of us has or develops in ourselves, the better off you will be.

Nathan: The abilities tend to give you respect for yourself and for the community and the work of others?

Asawa: That's right. I think putting more and more laws to try to make people respect you is really trying to take the tail to the head [laughter] and it'll never meet. If you equalized the brain, the body and the tail in each one of us, then I think that you can have a better balance. I'm not saying you'll be successful, that you won't know troubles, or fight, or anything. But I think that this has to happen. I think the responsibility of a parent is to know how much of that responsibility he has to his child. He has to take his part of that responsibility to raise that child. It's not just the federal government; it's not just the schools; it's not somebody else; it's the corporations too. It's also the family

Asawa: and it's also the neighbors and it's also the school. I think everyone is ignoring his share of it. If each one of us would just take a slice from each one of these people and put it into a sandwich, it's a much more balanced thing.

Seeing as how the women's movement is all so hot on fighting the men, that's sort of an unbalanced sort of struggle, so that they ignore the family. And then the school inherits these children who are sort of completely un-oriented. You try to stuff them with something; you try to give them a little pat and comfort. Finally you find that the schools are exhausted testing. You just don't have any time except to talk to them because nobody is talking to them. The need to talk is so great.

I think all of this has to do with not knowing how to put pieces of the puzzle together.

Nathan: When you work with these children, do you find that they are eager to talk and that they come to you for this warmth?

Asawa: Yes. They talk about the whole family and they talk about everything.

Nathan: That's a load for you to hear all this.

Asawa: All you do is to give them a little something to play with, and it's the first sign of friendship that they've had, in a way. The rest of the time, they're breaking their pencil or their ruler or disrupting the class. But the stories are pretty incredible; those should be recorded. If you could record them, then you would understand; you would understand where a lot of us are coming from.

Nathan: Yes, you're right. There is something symbolic about this little gift of the clay that you described. A receptive ear in school has always had this importance, but from what you say, it must be much more needed now.

Asawa: There are too many varied needs. No one is saying, "It's my responsibility." They say, "The board said this," "The superintendent said that," "We can't do that because the principal said that." If everyone of us said, "It is our responsibility to do this and this and this," and see that it gets done--if it means that we have to take a cut in salary, if it means that we have to take something out of the pension plan, or if we take that money, or if we take the pay raise (which is \$5 or \$6 million) and put it into program--any one of these things could solve the problem, if you really want to solve the problem.

But maybe the thing is, maybe they don't understand this. I'm an outsider, so I shouldn't say because I'm not inside. I would feel differently if I were part of the system.

"Stacking" and Multiple Benefits

Nathan: Just one more question, if I may. You have used the term "stack" and I think I understand it, but maybe you could say a little more about it. You do one thing but you also have another goal, or something else is happening at the same time?

Asawa: I'm just saying that in the way we're fractured today, no one has enough to do a good job, for what he wants to do. So, one example could be (we could talk about this now), the hotel field is very good because they in some way feel that they've done something for the schools.

Nathan: With the Hyatt Fountain?

Asawa: They haven't done anything, really, except that I still had to pay something at the end out of the final cost of it.

Nathan: No!

Asawa: Yes. I didn't lose money, but I took some out of my fee to finish the fountain. Anyway, I'm saying that by my taking children from the school to participate in it, I did my job and did something for the school, did something for the hotel. That's one way of stacking.

Nathan: Yes, I see.

Asawa: Another project that we've done, as I mentioned earlier, came through the Golden Gate National Recreation Agency. They had a building (that building down on the waterfront) and they needed somebody to paint it. Well, they could have commissioned an artist to do it. They asked me if I had some ideas, and they wanted children from Hunters Point and also--at least one school from Hunters Point and another from another neighborhood. So, we took a school from the Marina and one from Hunters Point.

We went to the Maritime Museum with one class on a field trip and involved them. We got the school art program. The Park Service paid for the paints, we got the children; we did a project that would be very useful to those children forever. It was a great experience for them; they went fishing, they bought a crabtrap from a fisherman, we went fishing afterwards, and took the fishing pole the second day.

When things are done this way, nobody puts very much into it, but they all get credit for it. The same way with mosaics or any project--murals, where a child puts only one area in, and if he were

Asawa: to do that by himself, it wouldn't have much meaning. He would take it home, he'd be happy with it, or his mother would give it to his grandmother or something, or he could leave it at the school. But when he does a collective thing like that, he takes credit for the entire thing, and he gets the same experience as what a mother does when she bakes cookies and a child comes in and helps beat the eggs or something and then goes out to play. But then when the child comes in at night and is asked by his father what he did, he says he baked some cookies. And he takes the credit for the whole thing, but he only does one part of it. The thing is, if when we do things like that in a very simple way--with a garden and watering--if a child remembers that he had to water, then he remembers he had a beautiful garden.

We don't do it dishonestly. We're not patronizing. We're simply finding ways. And when people have a potluck dinner, you have a fantastic dinner, right? When you do it alone, you just run out of ideas. I'm not for potluck dinners, but I think the thing that make things work is when people bring a little bit of something; that makes it work. That's why petitions and all that neighborhood work is always collective, like tree planting. Anything done collectively, everyone shares his little piece of it. Then if you go out into the community and begin to say, for example, at the medical center, one person who was working there felt he wanted to do something. We met and felt that the medical center could raise a little money and commission one school to do murals for the pediatric ward. In return, the medical center should buy paints and maybe pay for an artist to work at that school. The same thing is happening with Crocker Bank. One of the former employees said that there is a program where corporations and businesses give an employee time off to work in a school to do something. Well, the idea came up that maybe they'd sponsor a mural that would be done by school children, that was related to the bank. Then the bank would also then give the project to the school. They have agreed to do that. So they'll have hired an artist who used to work there. Shoshanah Dubiner worked in our program as a volunteer for a while. Then she worked with us this summer and last spring. She is a very talented artist. But for her to be only working in the graphics department of a place is very wasteful. But this way, by having her working in the schools with children and having them pay for it, this is again stacking--benefiting the school, benefiting the bank, benefiting the artist, so that no one is cheated in this whole population.

Then, in a way, the bank has a good image of themselves, and they are doing something for the community, and they're really spending whatever money they have to spend, rather than having a field trip to the bank with the kids looking at the teller. They're actually doing something that will make those children interested in that bank when they grow up.

Asawa: Just like the fountain, those children will always be interested in the Hyatt Hotel. If they were ever to leave and would come back to the City, they would probably stay at the Hyatt. All these things are beneficial to everyone. Although for the time that I put in--I have been paid and repaid back just by the response that people have had in town. Everyone benefits from it, so that we're not talking about money; we're really talking about how to make people feel, in a way, good about themselves.

You could still be in your old silly job, but there are ways in which you could really be made to feel good. If artists would really and truly be used in this way, they're the ones with the ideas. Don't you think?

Nathan: I do. You've expressed it beautifully.

Asawa: You can't "can" this and you can't send out a flier on this because it has to be done--people have to want to do it. I think one of the benefits of our program is having the schools begin to use the resources of parents; it's such a rich resource that they have not allowed to happen. In a way, it's too bad that they have kept getting more and more other people to try and solve their problems when really the solution would have been if the community and parents had been put into a working relationship with the schools, rather than having to feel that they are confronted. Hopefully, our program will always be developed that way rather than by trying to replace somebody. It makes everyone feel good, and parents feel much better by being able to be useful and to know what's happening and to help people to respond to that. Everybody really benefits from the combination of parents and community in the schools.

Nathan: That's really no small achievement if you can really make people feel good about themselves and come together in this way. Very exciting.

Asawa: I don't know. Maybe it's too late.

Nathan: It's never too late. I truly don't believe it is.

Asawa: I don't think it is either.

The Best Place

Nathan: What are you thinking of?

Asawa: I'm saying that if you know what you want to do, this country is the best place to do it in, in spite of all this. If you know exactly what you want to do, you can do it here. You can do almost anything that you want to do here, if you have an idea. If you have an idea, you know the resources are here (they're getting tighter), but nevertheless the information is here, the know-how, the freedom to move and to go and call and pick up a phone and order something. It might take two or three weeks or two months, but you can do it here.

Nathan: Right. [Laughter]

Asawa: That's why I think it's wonderful, really wonderful to live here, with all its problems. And yet, if we don't take care of these problems, then we'll probably go under too. Out of what I said, about the weakness, we'll just destroy ourselves; we won't be destroyed by other people; we'll be really destroying ourselves--eating our own resources from the inside and letting things die in ourselves.

Nathan: I would think you're one of the best demonstrations that it isn't too late.

Skilled People Bringing Change

Nathan: You were just saying that you were sort of curious to see how far--

Asawa: --how far a group of people can go. People talk about politics and people talk about changing things. We wanted to find out how far a group of people who had information--and see how powerful information is, or skills--can go toward changing a system. That's really what we're interested in.

We're interested in what skilled people can do to make changes, especially in our schools. And what can be done by the combination of parents and skilled people, because many of them are professional people. That has never been explored. We've always worked with the PTA and worked at the bazaars and worked at the community relations meetings; we've worked sort of in the way people expect us to work. Then we decided that the only way things are going to change was if we offered them something good, and deal only with offering something

Asawa: that is good. In a way, you can't refuse it, because it will work. When you're really honest about something, it's clear. That's why planting is a very honest activity. It's right there; you plant it, you water it, and you have a product. If you plant it and you don't take care of it, it dies.

But if you make some plans and you meet and you do all this, it doesn't matter if it works or not, really, because if it doesn't work, then we'll find another plan to do.

If you start a project, then in order to make it complete, you have to use the right tools and right methods to make it work. So that in a way, everything that we've done is very straightforward. So much of what we do in our schools is not straightforward, and it's not really honest; I mean, it's not honestly treating teachers honestly, it's not treating principals with respect, it's not treating anybody with respect. The system doesn't treat people--grownups, especially--with any kind of respect, to respect their intelligence.

There's no reason why somebody can't paint a wall. What is so wrong about that? Or what is so wrong about hanging something that is nice? Are you worried about the holes in the walls, or what are you worried about? Or what is wrong if a child gets up on a ladder; what is wrong about that? There's nothing really wrong about those things. And what is wrong about using a tool? Why do you keep the child--prevent him--from using a tool? Do you worry about liability? Why should we worry about lawsuits all the time, to keep us from doing anything? Those are all kinds of really destructive tools that people use to prevent anything from happening. And that's really in a way what I want to talk about.

It is possible to garden if you want to, right? What prevents people from doing very, very honest things? The system is filled with dishonesty, and we allow ourselves to be part of that. I think it's very wrong, especially in education. In an area where we're trying to teach the truth, we're keeping everybody from really questioning and testing the truth. Truth should be constantly tested. School should be a testing ground and a learning ground.

Universities are guilty also, because they produce departments of education, which are absolutely dishonest, dishonest--the most dishonest group, not individually, but the whole concept is dishonest. It's all the way from the top. And then the college is saying, "We won't accept you if you haven't had so many units of a language," or chemistry or math. So, you force the system to force the students to go into something that is just really a dead end again.

Educating Teachers

Nathan: I was interested in what you were saying about the schools of education. How do you identify the dishonesty in the system? I understand you're not saying individuals are dishonest, but you find something wrong in the system?

Asawa: Okay. Let's take elementary education--just one area. The only requirement of an elementary teacher in the area of art (I'm not going to talk about everything; I'm talking about the area I know)--in art and music, all they have to have is six weeks or one semester of music in order to teach, because they don't have a music specialist or an artist. That's why we came in, because of that dishonesty. We can't go and attack the universities, but we can say that the children need this and this, and we will provide it regardless of whether we have a degree or not. We will provide people who have the skills that can teach this. That's why, more and more, we are not going to need the university. I mean, we need the university, just like we need the symphony and the opera, but we're not going to need them if we're not preparing an audience and we're not preparing people to practice.

It's not saying that the cultural centers are going to be better than the performing art centers; it's just that we're not preparing anybody for anything. That's why it's really very critical; it's a very critical problem. We're not talking just about art; we're talking about skilled people.

Nathan: Right. And to have gone through the mill doesn't mean that you're skilled.

Asawa: That's right, that's right. It's a very big problem. (I should really spend the time [laughs]--I'm spending with you making pictures, but--)

Nathan: I see your point, but these perceptions are very crucial too; they're very important.

Asawa: But change can happen! It can happen overnight; what I'm talking about can change if people want to change it. We don't have to wind down and say it's going to take five years. In the whole school system, even in secondary schools, you have a period of 45 minutes to try to teach art?! That has nothing to do with art; it has to do with somebody who designed a schedule with so many classes, so many units, and that is it.

The only people who go into that box are people who are really not terribly changed, because they will allow themselves to do it. But an artist will not do it. We have many artists who have tried it and who have really given up because they could not take it anymore.

Asawa: It's interesting that they just finally have new positions now for people to work in the schools. And we're going to screen them, not so that they go in because of the affirmative action or they need a job or because they know somebody, but that while they do the work of relating to the children, that they have a skill to go in with.

Nathan: Do you anticipate that you will be able to find people--enough people--with skills?

Asawa: That's the thing. As we get bigger, there are a lot of people out of jobs, and people are looking for work. But, it gets harder and harder to find people who are skilled. And if they have skills, they can't do the other. That's why it's very critical that we begin to train young people to at least know what they want, because there's no point in struggling with adults. It's a great waste of time to try and convince them, because they're talking about the number of jobs--they're talking about all these other things that they're concerned with. But the kids know, they have the time; so it's important to them. And they will be the teachers. You have to teach them very young to become good teachers, and I think that that's really important.

That's why it's interesting to see how far we've managed to make people change within themselves without breaking up the system.

Parents should know that they should be able to speak up, and teachers should speak up and principals should take a stand, and they should all take on their share, instead of saying, "Well, I have to go to a meeting now," and not discuss the problem. That delays it another six weeks or another eight months. But they can't make a decision on the spot. It's difficult. That's why commissions, committee meetings--all these things are delay tactics we use. And these could be vehicles to make other things happen, but I think that they're essentially useless now.

We have hopes in the Riles Commission, we have hopes in the National Endowment for the Arts, we have hopes for the Art Commission and the BART Art Council--we hope that all these things will do something. I hope that because I'm on this Art Commission; I don't think I'm going to be on it much longer, because I feel still that I can do more elsewhere. I think I did more in the first five years of the Alvarado program, I mean, made it happen by doing it.

Nathan: The Alvarado program?

Asawa: Yes. I think now, the parents have taken it over, which is pretty amazing.

Hopeful Signs

Nathan: That's splendid. At one time you were, I think, sort of wondering what would happen, and now you feel the transition has come about. That's very complimentary and wonderful.

Asawa: It's happening. We're pulling from Manpower Act and we're trying to pull Neighborhood Arts, or any group together, focusing on the schools. We helped them simply by opening up schools; we don't try to organize, but make that opening for each one of them. Hopefully, a lot of the money that has been spent in the school district is now going sort of in our direction--not necessarily by our doing it.

Nathan: That in itself is a change; something has happened.

Asawa: Yes. But it's very slow, very slow. I think it gets bigger and bigger. [Laughter]

Nathan: [Laughter] You are holding your head.

Asawa: Now, the thing is, I think that we have made a full circle. I think now, because so many people are asking--they've always asked if they could come to the studio and do this or that. In those days, it was just a field trip. But now, I think there will be a reason for it.

Nathan: A reason for people to come and observe?

Asawa: For me to be working in my studio on my work.

Nathan: In the school?

Asawa: No, not necessarily in the school. I would do that, but I don't think that that is really my role; I think we should get other artists to do that in the schools. We have three now to do that.

Nathan: What are their names?

Asawa: Earle Curtis; he's a potter at Everett High. Nancy Thompson at Mission High School; she's more a painter but she's also a sculptor, and she has worked in our program from the very beginning, so she's finally got all this and it is finally to this point where she is now artist-in-residence.

Nathan: I see. And then who are the other ones?

Asawa: Henri Marie-Rose; he is a sculptor and he's going to work in materials--clay. He's going to be at Edison.

Nathan: That's quite an achievement.

Asawa: Yes. That's the National Endowment. And the Endowment is interested in our program because of the community involvement, which they don't have; artists are isolated.

Nathan: Right. Then you go stacking again.

Albers' Use of Synergetics

Asawa: Yes. It's all doing much more than a separate thing. They're going into this one-to-one tutoring, whereas, we can have 20 children doing individual work of their own, going on, if the teacher is very good at it. You do all these things and you bring them together. And you can have a tough kid here who's put there, and another one in here, and they just really work on their own work. Then finally something nice will come out of it.

In a way, it's a technique we've talked about before. You know the idea of the synergetics to learning where you cluster people and make them make decisions, and make them think and hold them responsible for these decisions, even if it's a color or even if it's a story or even if it's anything one does.

There's an interesting man in Santa Barbara who was in school with us--Mervin Lane--who has written this book, Synergetics: An Approach to Learning. He clusters his classes with several groups of five students--five or six--and he drops something in the pot, and they swish it around and they take this and they move it there and back here and they swish it around there, so that each student gets the benefit of 40 students rather than just himself. They answer and they correct, so that it's not 40 students to one teacher; it's 40 students to 40 ideas.

This is the idea that Albers used at school, and that's the way he approached his classes. He dropped problems out; you came with solutions; you discussed all the solutions. The ones that were no good, we threw out and we took the good ones, and those were the new problems. We took those and we made new solutions and stacked ideas on ideas. Then finally, all of us had the information of every one of us.

That's not happening now. The science teacher is here, the English teacher is here, the art teacher is here, the principal is over here.

Asawa: Then they're talking about team teaching, and that's a form of it. But the team teaching can also go in the classroom with the students too. We talked about sharing--the sharing time. The words are all there, and it can happen very easily.

Nathan: It's interesting how the ideas you learned when you were with Albers keep coming up again and again in your life.

Asawa: They also go back to my childhood too, in the way we did things there. So, in a way, I was very receptive to Albers' ideas. Then, in turn, in return, he also sort of defined the Zen background and brought it into a kind of intellectual, visual context, so that the whole thing really fits very well.

I don't know that that [is something] everybody can apply, but it's so universal that it should be useful.

The Future and Making a Living

Nathan: Would you care to say anything about what you might be doing next? I know you're going into the new state arts council now.

Asawa: I'm hoping to go back to making a living. [Laughter]

Nathan: And how does an artist make a living these days?

Asawa: Well, I've never held a job, so I would just do my own work. If I sell something, I sell something; if I don't, then I don't. If I don't sell too much, then I grow more in my vegetable garden and live on less.

Nathan: This is really what you've been talking about.

Asawa: There's the other thing, which I am just resisting because I know that it is an easy way to go, to go on sort of the lecture routine. I could jump from weekend to weekend, from university to university, to do all that--talk about this and talk about that, and it will fulfill the need because they've gotten an endowment grant for this lecture tour or for a woman's thing here or--

Nathan: An artist's thing here?

Asawa: You know, all that. That's very tempting because it's very easy to do. You just pick up and you have your speech and you have your slides, and you talk. But I don't think that really is the solution. I'd rather be less sure and really explore things that I need to explore artistically, than to do that.

Nathan: Is this back to your idea of each person's best use?

Asawa: Yes. I don't think I should be used that way. I think there are a lot of people who could do that. I would just rather people came to me, not for any reason except that I think the message is right here and it's not there.

Nathan: I gather that people already do this a great deal; they do tend to come to you.

Asawa: Yes. I've been asked to teach at Cal for three weeks or something like that.

Nathan: Does that interest you?

Asawa: Well, it sort of does. But even that I think is sort of busy work.

Nathan: Of course, I think it would be wonderful for Cal, just speaking very selfishly.

Asawa: [Laughter] They need a lot of help. It's not together.

Nathan: Would this be in the education department?

Asawa: Architecture.

Nathan: I suspect the students would get a great deal from you.

Asawa: I've spoken to a group at State College--students. I don't know what the class is; it's sort of community, and there are art students in that too. But the students need direction. They're not getting it. They're not getting it because those who are teaching it aren't in the real world. The universities are not in the real world; that's why they may collapse too. Just as schools are not in the real world; that's why they may collapse too. Maybe they should collapse. I don't mean "tear it down." I just mean the structure has to be--

Nathan: It's hard to know whether institutions can revitalize themselves; we don't know whether they can.

Asawa: I think it's already in the first place--schools were an abstraction in the first place; they're a substitute.

Nathan: For what?

Asawa: For learning. I mean, in a way they came out of an economic need rather than an educational need.

Nathan: What would an alternative be, assuming that one could do what really was best for students, for the kids. What would be the best?

Asawa: What would be the best? There have to be more people doing what they're doing, rather than talking about what they're doing.

Nathan: Teaching by demonstration?

Asawa: Yes, right. That's happening, I know, in industry. They just don't have the material; they can't hire people because they're not being trained; they're not being trained and they're being held back by unions who are not allowing things to be taught, things are secret.

Nathan: Oh?

Asawa: Well, the painters union, the plumbers union--you can't get in to train unless you have a friend or family or something like that, so a lot of information that should be passed on, is not being passed on.

Nathan: Like an apprentice system?

Asawa: Right. The thing is, we need that whole concept to return because what originally we did was father-son, son-grandson, passing along. Mother, daughter, granddaughter, grandchildren--all these things that were done naturally in a family unit were done then in the guild, and then were lost in the Industrial Revolution where now the machine takes over--so now the parent is no longer useful and we're geared to be put into computers and to machinery. The human being in a way is getting more and more useless, except that what we're getting out of the machine is not going to solve our problems and is creating new problems.

Nathan: In this connection, we were talking briefly about the way your father received his guests. He wouldn't stop to talk?

Asawa: People who used to come--salesmen or friends that would come over--he would just keep working in the field; he wouldn't come into the house. He would go on and he'd continue to hoe and they'd have to walk with him. And when they got to the end of the line, they went off. This was his way of not losing any time, because he couldn't afford to sit and talk to anybody.

I just think that we are at a point now in our society that we can't sit around and talk any more (because that used to be the luxury; that is really a luxury) and that we have to begin to make every minute count. That is one of the greatest wastes in government and in schools.

Asawa: What we want to do is we want to teach our young people to be effective, so that we should spend less time at meetings and more time doing the activity. So that, instead of having teachers talking to a classroom of kids, and they're sitting there and her talking, there has to be another kind of activity that teaches them something. It's through action and through participation that we will accomplish something.

I could show you a fence done this Christmas by our three sons; they put a fence up for us. Our son just fixed all of our windows. We could be sitting around talking to psychiatrists about our family problems, but we could also be really utilizing our young people and teaching them skills.

Our son in Oregon who's a student at the University of Oregon formed a corporation with five architecture students and they got a loan and they're building a house. They designed a house; they bought the land. They'll find out whether they'll make it or not. I just think that it's great that he has that confidence that he can do such a thing, and that's just through working on this house and doing a lot of grubby work--fences and decks and retaining walls and all that. It's so much better than sitting in the class studying architecture and design. I think that the real world has to be what we have to deal with. I deal with it every day, the real world, the reality, because nobody tells me what to do in the morning. I wake up and I have to make my plans.

Nathan: How have your daughters responded to the kind of demonstration of life that you've given them?

Asawa: They love the home and they cook and bake and sew (I don't sew, but they sew). My daughter, who has a child now, just enjoys being at home. She doesn't need to fight the battle, the women's battle. She does her work.

Nathan: Are they interested in art as a part of their life?

Asawa: Yes. They're not interested in shows and other things. They say that they've seen me do it, so they don't have to do it too. We all come together and we're still very close. In fact, tonight they're inviting us to dessert and coffee. We have a very nice family.

Nathan: Yes, you do. You were saying a moment ago that you were interested in developing a studio in this next door house that you are acquiring.

Asawa: Yes. Hopefully we'll be able to. It will take probably another ten years.

Nathan: What sort of space do you want for your work?

Asawa: I would like a space that I could go inside and outside, with a tall ceiling so I could work on high things; have an adequate sink and a place for a little burner--really very simple--where I could mix cement if I needed to. I could heat wax or I could pour cement or do some heavy work.

Nathan: And then you would need--what?--a big table if you want to do your water color or other structures?

Asawa: Yes. I would separate the painting from the main studio idea--a room apart from that. The other stuff is too dirty and dusty.

Nathan: Is there a special sort of light? Do you need a north light for your painting?

Asawa: No, not necessarily; I'm not into that. I may eventually need to have that. But the way I work, I don't really need that. I work out in a field too, and I like natural sunlight in what I do.

Nathan: What is there about having your studio close to your home that interests you?

Asawa: Because it doesn't separate me from my family. That's one of the things that I insisted on when the children were growing up--that I would be able to go downstairs at midnight, after they've gone to sleep, or I could go back and forth; or they could be playing outside, I could be inside. Or I could move the thing outside and be with them when I was working at something, so that they were always involved with me when I was working so that they understood the whole cycle of work, rather than my going off and getting a babysitter. "Going off" was something they knew nothing about; then resenting it because I was away, and all the problems that come with that sort of build up.. And I, in a way, having been on the Art Commission have taken a lot of time away from them. But they were a little older.

I still feel that being at home when they come home really has something that's very important. The past eight years have been less of that for me. Also, one of the things is they haven't seen me work--except I did do the fountain. I did a few big things, but the daily things I haven't been doing.

Nathan: You express your interest and deep feeling about your family so beautifully. It reminds me that I should probably ask you if you could just do a genealogy, if you wish. Just the names of certainly the children, and then your husband and yourself, and if you would like, of your parents, as far back as it's convenient for you, if you remember your grandparents' names and if you remember your aunts and uncles, as many as you can. If you would like to do that, we often do for these memoirs. Would that be something you might want to think about?

Asawa: I can't remember them all.

Nathan: This does happen, certainly. There could be "as many as I remember" or something like that to indicate that it isn't a big research project. But it's a way of situating you in a family, because you really are a very family-minded person.

XI DEVELOPING THE STACKING IDEA (1976)

CETA Program in the Schools

Asawa: What do you want to talk about this morning?

Nathan: I had a few notes, and maybe you will have some things also that you want to talk about. I was very glad to see this booklet on the Alvarado School art workshop because part of it does lead into some things I thought you might want to talk about. The last time we talked, there had been some reference to the CETA people in the schools, and I gather that is included here?

Asawa: That's included in this booklet.

Nathan: Good. Would you care to say what you think may have been accomplished so far by the use of the CETA people in the schools?

Asawa: I think it's not just in the schools now. I think it was the opportunity to bring city agencies together to work on an interagency program. I have the whole thing here for you, which goes through the proposal and the positions that we asked for and the people that worked to put this together. We had people from Public Works, Community Gardens, Unified School District, Alvarado Community Art Program, Board of Education, Eureka Valley Association, a community of individuals with Sharon Kidder, and the Art Commission and Friends of Noe Valley. We had additional organizations--the Art Commission and the other city agencies--represented at this meeting where we wrote this proposal to Manpower.

Nathan: And you convened the group?

Asawa: We met right here (at my house) to work on it. This was January 6th. In November, 1975 when I was at Ben Franklin Junior High School, through the program that is called ESAA (which is Emergency School Aid Act), I met with the community of parents there and suggested a proposal similar to this--the idea of bringing gardens and visual and performing arts together. They sent that in, which was rejected

Asawa: by HEW as not meeting the criteria for reducing racial isolation. (You know, if there was anything that would reduce it, it would be these three things, but they turned it down.)

So, after the Art Commission, in December or November, had gone through the Manpower program to hire artists (the history is certainly known to John Kreidler, who was an intern for the Neighborhood Arts Program)--

Nathan: Oh, is he the same one who is now at Alameda?

Asawa: Alameda County, yes. John Kreidler I guess worked for the Labor Department, and then when he came here (I guess he was at UCLA and then he came to intern with the Neighborhood Arts Program) he read the legislation and said that certainly artists would qualify, just as a street cleaner, just as a clerk would qualify. So the San Francisco Art Commission applied for I think 24 positions, and they got these first. Then the artists began to work on murals (most of them were muralists, I think, in that first group). What happened was, those artists who had been working on murals for nothing could finally be paid for their work. A lot were in the Mission District--several in the Mission District--and I can't remember the other areas.

Anyway, they worked in the Alvarado program--I was on an oral board to interview school aides. This was when the School District cut out the hall guards. Then Dorice Murphy and a group of parents I guess and principals all felt that they needed the positions but the people didn't want to be termed hall monitors; they wanted to redefine the job. So they were redefined as school aides, so that they would not be used just to monitor bathrooms and halls, but they would be sort of qualified--they'd have more qualifications than just a heavy hand.

I was on one panel, and we interviewed, and one of the things that we asked for was that they have broader experience. So, after seeing that happen (I think they had seven positions for that; many of them were re-hired when they were paraprofessionals who became CETA aides), then we felt that why couldn't we ask for artists, since the Art Commission had done that. Since we wanted to really work on the gardening curriculum, we thought that maybe we could ask for gardeners too. So, we decided that we would make a three part interagency, interdisciplinary plan--

Nathan: Excuse me. When you say "we"--?

Asawa: Well, our group of parents, Leah Forbes, Joan Abrahamson, Sharon Litsky, Lois Link--sort of the board of Alvarado.

Citywide Educational Beautification Program

Nathan: Alvarado was the core?

Asawa: Yes. We were thinking, "Maybe if we could get one gardener and one artist--" Then we figured out, as long as we're doing it, we really should ask for people that we would need. We met with Eunice Elton and talked with Lucille Abrahamson about it to see if that were possible, if we could do something like that. So we applied, and we called it the Citywide Educational Beautification Program, and we made a request for 60 positions.

The positions were city-school planning, where we wanted to bring in an urban garden, and then housing projects-school murals (that was 20 positions), and performing artists-in-residence, which would be the dancers, musicians, poets. We didn't figure out how we were going to get the supplies on that, so we had a hard time with that. We didn't get any supplies; we got the positions but no supplies for them.

Nathan: Was there a reason why you didn't put supplies in?

Asawa: In other cities, ten percent goes to materials; I mean, the federal funds--Manpower. Ten percent goes for equipment and materials so that gardeners or clerks or maintenance people could have some material. But in San Francisco, we didn't get the ten percent. I think the legislation or something was not quite there; we were anticipating, but we never got it. Finally in the end we were getting it through the community development funds, revenue-sharing; but that's many, many months later that we've gotten it. In the meantime, we have scraped up what Alvarado had and used it and we've gone to the Zellerbach Family Fund and they've helped us twice with materials and now recently with getting a truck--maintenance on two trucks that Public Works will give us if we will pay for the repair. So we now have two trucks. That's getting way ahead of us.

So anyway, going back to the rejection of the HEW ESAA thing, we went into this. Because of the bad experience that Manpower had with the school district and the school aides, they didn't want to have anymore CETA go through the schools; they didn't want to deal with the schools. So they said they would deal with the Art Commission. They know the Art Commission; they know that it is not a big hassle, it's not going to be complicated.

We asked the Art Commission to take the 60 positions through them. The Art Commission at the same time were asking for 35 more positions. So, we were talking about 95 positions. The Art Commission said, well, it was going to be difficult to just keep it separate. This was a marvelous opportunity for another agency to deal with the school district and tie it in with housing, because

Asawa: our proposal asked to develop a program which is highly visible citywide involving children, their parents, community, and schools to work on adjacent lots to schools developing a curriculum about farming and animal husbandry. Performing artists and muralists would give workshops for children and adults culminating in murals and performances in the schools and neighborhoods, developing vocational career concepts for themselves and the community.

The aim is to have gardens, murals and performances in cooperation with the Bi-Centennial planning (we're going to combine it) and there's an interagency cooperation and a commitment for this program from the Park and Recreation Department; the Department of Public Works; Tree Planting and Community Gardens; San Francisco Art Commission; the Bi-Centennial Education and Youth Community; the San Francisco Unified School District gardening department; Redevelopment Agency for facility planning (we would borrow lands from the Redevelopment [Agency] that are adjacent to schools); the Housing Authority; and independent community groups. So these are all the people that are involved in proposal writing.

This was beginning to try to develop a network where government begins not to compete with one another but to consolidate services and not duplicate services, so that we would begin to see what our resources were and we wouldn't be fighting. A truck that is idle could be used by another department, if they needed it.

It's been a great struggle in practice; in theory, it sounds very nice on paper. It's logical. It's taken months to get this together, with a lot of people working and a lot of people finally putting what they had before in the back seat and beginning to work together, and realizing that this is the only way a city is going to survive now at this point; it's very critical. Nobody has enough to do a good job. Everybody has a little bit, and when you think, and when you add all of the money that is poured into youth programs--that's private and public and federal and state and local--it's staggering, staggering. But you ask any group [individually], and they don't have enough. Just an example is the amount of money that's poured into the schools in the name of students. It's staggering, staggering! And they talk about a deficit. We'll always have a deficit, that's all. I mean, think of the national debt; you can't stop having children because they're inheriting a billion dollar deficit. That's what I was told when I was in college; friends said they weren't going to have children because they didn't want to lay the national debt onto their child.

Anyway, I think that's really essentially why we tried to do this.

The Alvarado Idea

Nathan: How did you get people to come at this from an entirely different point of view? Because this sort of territorial protection has been going on for so long, how did you get people to move in a different way?

Asawa: We got these people together to say that maybe we could try it. It was non-threatening. It wasn't money out of their budget; it was really so-called outside money (it's actually our money anyway; the school paid for it in taxes) and we brought it. Well, our simple idea--the Alvarado idea--was, now that we had worked in the schools, now we really have to work with the children where they live. Then we also have to work with the space that's between the school and the home, which are the parks and empty lots, and the walk between the home and the school also had to be incorporated into this. So, we felt that we could work with the Housing Authority, which is a body that is already organized. We can't work with every neighborhood and every neighborhood group, but the Housing Authority is throughout the city. They work with many, many families. The need is much greater for them than any other group of people--residents.

Also the work we're doing in the schools can then have meaning for the parents, so that what we do in the schools for their children, can also be repeated in the home. Many of the projects that we did at school were with the idea that these children would take it back--the murals, weaving--all the skills we're trying to hopefully put in. It all sounds like it's grand and successful; it's really all very grubby and modest, and very modest with what we had to work with. But the idea is simple to translate and for many people to do because all they now have to do is have the desire for it. We're hoping to create that desire for it, and then we would go to the city agencies.

So we met with Housing. We met with Mary Rogers and Western Addition and we met with Ron Mermal, who had a position of this kind--sort of trying to do something with the community centers within each housing complex. And Scott, who's an assistant to I guess Eneas Kane; he's head of housing. We began to talk about painting murals in housing projects and involving the artist and the performing artist and the garden, to try to build that up.

Development of Gardening

Asawa: We had several gardens--I think a garden is starting in Valencia Gardens, and Ping Yuen. Then Fort Mason gave us a piece of land there adjacent to Galileo West, which is the school that's in there, and they have been able to draw residents from that neighborhood, from the Marina, to come in. It was an impressive group of people; about 20 people I guess have a little plot there.

Nathan: Where did you find a garden around Ping Yuen? I had no idea there was any land not built on.

Asawa: It's one of these interior courts where the grass is--I haven't been to that one, but I was told about it. We did this instead of setting up a whole new gardening program. The city is already into gardening with the community gardens through the Department of Public Works, and that was begun in 1972 or '73. Before that, in 1971 or '72, I had written of it. I have a very good friend, Mai Arbegast; do you know her? She's a landscape architect. She has recently been in the planning of Filoli; she was very responsible for having that turned into a horticultural educational institution. She is the landscape architect in California who is probably the most knowledgeable of every plant up and down the coast. She has taught at Cal and she has her own practice here. Mai Arbegast--she's a Japanese. Her family had the seed company in San Jose--Kitazawa Seed Company. Her father used to own a huge seed business; her brother still owns one.

Anyway, I had talked to her about getting 4H into San Francisco; I felt that through the nutrition and gardening that we could have it. So she put me into contact with people in California. Then we were told that the Supervisors had to request it. I guess Bob Mendelsohn was the Supervisor that became interested in it, and 4H came in from San Mateo. There was Jim Brenner, and Fay Lee who is also in nutrition and the domestic part of 4H. Besides that, Sue Reid has now been hired by Public Works to organize the community gardens. Then Rosemary Menninger and her friend (whose name I can't remember) wanted to develop an ecology center. I recommended that; they got a grant from the San Francisco Foundation.

So all these things were sort of separately happening at the same time.

Nathan: I'm curious about how you came to know all these things were going on.

Asawa: They weren't going on until we started it. When we first started Alvarado, the three things that we wanted to cover were gardening, performing arts and visual arts. I mean it's all the same thing;

Asawa: only this is much clearer and it's much bigger because we now have a body of performing artists and a body of gardeners and a body of visual artists, whereas at that time we had a little dancer come in and do a few hours here and a mother came in and gardened for us. It goes way back to 1968 when we struggled for about eight months before we could get permission to garden. We couldn't garden; that was illegal in San Francisco.

Nathan: I did not know that.

Asawa: Oh yes. The gardeners union had to trim the trees or trim the bushes; nobody could touch the land around the school. This took us months for permission, to get that done. We started as a science program, teaching the children about plant life. We didn't even start the Alvarado program as an art program; we started it as a science program, because art absolutely would not work into--I mean, when I go back to picking out all the little steps that we had to take!

Then, the Park and Recreation, I went to them and they gave us two flats.

Nathan: Of little plants?

Asawa: Yes--pansies and other plants that they gave us to start a garden around Alvarado School. Then we built those planters. Mai was extremely interested in it because Mai is on the board of the Strybing Arboretum and she knows Jack Spring. So, all of these people were already doing these things in the city, but not in the schools. The school department is separate from the park department--all this separation of departments. So, Mai helped me get in contact with the Department of Agriculture; somebody named Winlow. Then he referred the letter to somebody else in San Mateo 4H and 4H called me--all these things came about just by sort of investigating. Nobody really knows about any of that going on now. The Alvarado gardeners went to the community gardens and sort of worked together.

There's a greenhouse behind the Laguna Honda Hospital which used to be the city's greenhouse. It's not used as much; I think now it's in the park. But this used to service the entire city. That is sort of the headquarters.

The gardeners are very highly organized because they're very sort of together people. There are many that are in organic gardening. The requirement for them was to have some experience in gardening--at least two years of gardening, or two years of college. We're now criticized because we don't have enough minorities gardening. But in the application of the whole thing, we had only one Black; there was one Korean and maybe one Japanese. But neither one of them could speak English. The Black applicant was only interested in the maintenance; he wasn't interested in gardening; he

Asawa: was interested in mowing and maintaining a garden. So they were really disqualified, and they were the minorities. Well, we were more concerned with getting people that were skilled.

Nathan: Were there any women interested?

Asawa: Many, many young, attractive women. They're very energetic and they're full of ideas. They're very, very good. So, with all this, that needed a lot of help with materials; we have struggled with that.

Mayor Alioto's Bi-Centennial Committee gave us \$2,000 for a garden in the Western Addition. Then we got an anonymous donation through the Bi-Centennial for ten gardens, that meant that each garden got \$500. That was the beginning for ten gardens.

Then, there was a proposal we had written that Anne Theilen is now monitoring. Anne Marie Theilen monitors all the CETA gardeners and artists. She was one of the original people from Alvarado. She began Edison. When Alvarado began, she came to us to start something at Edison. Then they moved with busing. She's been one of the strongest people in the program.

Monitoring and Volunteering

Asawa: When we moved into the Art Commission, then she was made the monitor because she had the contacts with the schools. Then Leah Forbes became a full-time director of the Alvarado program, so that there's always this connection. We always wanted people who knew where things were and who needed this and weren't ignorant.

Nathan: Is the monitor a sort of supervisor?

Asawa: Yes, and sees that those people get there, and if they don't work, then sees that they get removed or have a fair hearing. It's very demanding; it's the key person in the success of this.

We had a little trouble with the Neighborhood Arts Program not knowing how to incorporate it with their organizers. A lot of the artists are highly organized, and they felt that the organizers weren't doing their job. It was a little touchy at the beginning, but it's all worked out. People understand that there's no one trying to push anybody out, but that people have to understand what the duties are, you know, and be able to work.

It's been a very interesting experiment and I think it's going to work out. It has been done in a non-political way. I don't feel that it's political. But it's a restructuring of what is all there

Asawa: anyway; we're not replacing anybody; we're just redefining the role that they should play. In a way, it's still very informal because it's not throughout the city; it's only just a small core from each department functioning this way. But if it could go deeper into each department, it would probably save our city--I think.

Nathan: Do you have room in the program for volunteers, or people who wish to enter?

Asawa: Yes. But very often it's a lot of work to have volunteers, unless they're steady. They might come twice and then drop out, you know. But we have found that there are certain ones, like Phoebe Brown, who is retired from City Planning. She has been an asset from the very beginning; she's worked. But she found somebody she liked to work with.

You can't just say, "Go to this school this morning, go to that school this morning." I think the ideal situation for a volunteer is to find somebody that you can work with and be in contact with a person, and follow that person, so that you're not out there naked every time you go; you're sort of directed. That's really the frustration with many volunteers, they sometimes volunteer and they get there and nobody knows where they should be or what room they should be in. That's frustrating for the volunteer too.

Nathan: You're suggesting the relationship is very important for volunteers.

Asawa: Yes.

Nathan: From what you have described, do you think this kind of coming together will continue in the city?

Asawa: I think that it's pretty well established now. Housing now wants artists. We have artists working in housing projects: North Beach, Bernal Dwellings, Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, Sunnydale. All of these artists are now working with the community there. Now they want those centers filled with activities, where before NAP was so small it couldn't do it. With this new group of artists, there's the greater possibility of something happening. It's not that easy, you know. You have to go through the community group and then you have to go through the board, you have to go to the staff. You get all of the scene--you get very tired of that whole business.

But nevertheless, I think hopefully out of all of this will come a decentralization of the artists so that each department begins to ask for artists. The Park and Recreation could really use artists, Housing could really use artists, Social Services could really use artists to work on the waiting rooms, to work on projects for children as the parents wait to get their checks or work on their problems.

Talespinners

Asawa: One of the most touching groups is the one with the senior citizens. There's a group of artists; they're called Talespinners. They're actors. The nice thing about this is we were able to hire senior citizens through CETA at half-time instead of full-time. We had Tommy Roberts who is a puppeteer; he goes all over and he performs at Cal Berkeley and other places.

Nathan: Oh, I've seen him! He has a little knit cap, and he pulls the puppets out of his bag?

Asawa: Yes, right. And I made a puppet of him, a Tommy Roberts puppet.

Nathan: [Laughter] Did you? A Tommy Roberts puppet! Is it a hand puppet?

Asawa: It's a little hand puppet, and he uses it in his act all the time. In fact, I cast his face at one of the festivals, and I made some sketches while he was performing for us. He works with Talespinners and there's a group of about five actors.

Nathan: They're all old people?

Asawa: No, no; they're young. There's one named Sandy. They go to senior centers, and one group is doing oral history with people who are in the housing projects; they're interviewing them. They have discovered that there are old actors and old spiritual singers from churches. Then they have brought a few of these on to go the next place, and they have incorporated them into the group.

One of the actresses has a little baby, so the baby is included in the act. It sits on the stage and looks around, as though he knows what's happening. [Laughter] Now they have recently been able to hire three more senior citizens through CETA.

So, the thing is, instead of the usual ways of helping the senior citizens through the state and through this or that organization, through this volunteer group and going to visit, suddenly the senior citizens are becoming performers for themselves and for each other. Suddenly all these little stories that are being told, you know, in the past--they're being incorporated into the plays. It's just an incredible thing!

So that the thing is, suddenly the artist is used in every way, so that it's not just the juveniles here and the senior citizens here and the prisoners here. Suddenly, by bringing artists into each of these different departments, if they do it in a serious way, I think we can really change the social structure of our lives, not only here but almost anywhere.

Nathan: In institutions, also?

Asawa: In institutions, yes.

Nathan: That's the hardest thing--the leavening that makes it all start to happen. What do they do with the oral histories when they interview these elderly people?

Asawa: What they're doing is they're interviewing them and they're trying to find a way in which they can compile it. See, they don't have any of the money to do any of that; they only have the salary of the person. But beyond that is a lot of work, much more than just the taping. Anyway, what they're trying to do, I think, is they're trying to use this material so that it becomes recycled and incorporated into their performances.

Artists and Community Life

Asawa: You would have to talk to those people in order to get sort of the feel of it. Just seeing from the outside, I'm telling you the things that are actually happening with the artists. Things that we had never even anticipated! We were thinking of murals and a few performances in parks, you know, to get the kids aroused. Actually we're really talking about something very serious and in-depth because I think the artist understands all these human needs because that's what the artist deals with every day of his life. The Housing Authority, if they're really in tune with this, it's to their advantage to have artists living within a housing unit. That artist could be an artist-in-residence, could be utilized in the community center, could be used to work on beautifying. They're now talking about paint for the entire building.

Nathan: So you're integrating artists back into the life of the whole community?

Asawa: Yes, and using them just as you use street cleaners and clerks and secretaries and insurance writers and lawyers and doctors. They are one group that can bring so much pleasure to dealing with the problems that we have. People want to keep it stirring so that they can maintain the status quo, maintain more jobs for the services that are all over the city.

Just in one case of one young boy who's a friend of our children. We tried to get his social worker to help and she says, "No, I just give them the money every month." That was her job; that was her duty. Somebody else goes in and takes another piece of him, and another person is going to do something else for him. When you add

Asawa: all those people up, it's costing us a lot of money just to keep him alive--maintain him--without any help. Had there been a way in which this boy could have continued with music, which is what he loved--

I'm not going to go into whether art can help. I'm just simply saying that had there been maybe more of a possibility of this when he was in school along the way, it may not have changed him but there would have been an option.

Nathan: An option. Exactly. It is exciting to hear how this all comes together.

Asawa: I think now that it's all set up, if people want it, it will work. There's really no real need for me to do much because I think it's already happening with a lot of artists. The gardeners are organizing themselves and the artists are organizing themselves, and so much of what we had to do--a little bit here and a little bit there--is really being done by a whole group of really concerned people. I think that maybe the next crop will not be as concerned because it's already established and they will think it's always happened this way.

The gardeners have written a gardening curriculum that they would like to give to teachers. Some of the danger of all of this is that, if it is taken to the schools, unless it's carefully planned, the teacher will leave the room to let the gardener do it. But the idea--since this is really a very temporary program, in a way--would be to train enough teachers that would be concerned. There are many teachers who are really concerned and would really do it, but there could be a tendency that they would think, since they know nothing about it, "Let the expert do it and I'll go correct my papers." They don't want that to happen, any more than they want that to happen with the artist.

In-Service Training and Working Together

Asawa: The idea is for the artists in the schools to work with the students and the parents and the teachers in the same room; this is the ideal way to do in-service. In-service cannot be done in isolation; you can't get a group of 25 teachers together and tell them, "You do this and this" and then expect them to take it back to the classroom. What you have to do is to teach them the skill, you have to teach them the method, and you have to also show how children learn. It doesn't necessarily mean that they have to be quiet or that they have to be in rows; disorderliness is part of that process. This is what most teachers and most educational institutions don't ever tell these people. The Department of Education in all these universities are

Asawa: worthless; they should be really kicked out for the kinds of things they are teaching the young people. It's getting better now; it's beginning to happen now that the students are going out into the community.

But the students can't just be thrown out; the teacher has to go with them, to work in the schools if they're going to go out with student teaching. They can't just go in there as observers; they have to really participate in what is needed and in the activities. I think that when that happens, then we will begin to have a change to a kind of teacher that understands what we're trying to do. We don't have a lot of teachers that understand this.

Nathan: Do you feel that the newer, younger teachers are perhaps a little more interested in your vision?

Asawa: I don't really know. I would say that those college students that were exposed to people like Buckminster Fuller are beginning to understand this approach to learning. But then we still have the system to deal with, and people are very tired. Maybe the step that Dr. Alioto is taking now might open it up, and it may meet with great resistance.

The thing in the school district is that they're all divided too. The administrators are fighting the teachers' union, and nobody's paying attention to the kids; it's an adult battle. It's a greedy, vicious thing that's happening.

Nathan: And you think that possibly Mr. Alioto's proposals will move in a better direction?

Asawa: I think so. I don't know. I think any program can work. You can work it right in the system that's there now, if you have competent people. That's all you need. You don't need the building; it's not the building, it's not the geography, it's not the way the sun hits the classroom--all that is just baloney, really. I think it's the people. I keep saying you can teach in a tent. I think the sooner we get to recognizing people that are capable of doing something, and paying them (and they, again, are the idea people), beginning to really use them--not just ideas, not just sitting in a vacuum, sitting around down at the Institute somewhere in Santa Barbara or Stanford, but using those people who are right in the heart of it and working--those are the people. It could be a younger person, it could be a mother. It's how to use people where they are--that is really the creative thing to do. It's not the university person who's going to tell you what to do. Those are all constraints and those all keep people who have a little information from giving it; it intimidates people.

Asawa: I think the nursery school concept of bringing parents in and working with the children in the situation, so that parents don't feel alone, is a good one. A woman who speaks only Spanish with her child, staying at home, doesn't do that child any good. But if she is able to come to a group of women, she can then teach the other women, the non-Spanish speaking women, all her cultural background. Then, in return, her child is learning to speak English, and then he can socialize and come together. We can utilize all the people, all the potential, at every level. This is I think what makes a family work too, when the parent utilizes all the skills. I think that that sort of is the basis for learning--to understand where that person is at that moment; that is really the important thing--to train within yourself and to get that across.

Nathan: And then to make it possible for each person to contribute what he has to offer?

Asawa: Right, right. I think that is the most important thing. Government has to understand that; government has to understand that a neighborhood that can get together and put up a fence, instead of waiting for the Department of Public Works to put up the fence, is going to cost us far less and going to make that community far more responsive. We'll save the city millions of dollars, and that money can then be used for something that's more productive than the paperwork that it takes to get the permission to get that fence up.

There are a lot of talented people in this city who can't use their talents because the law restricts them. It says you can't do it. The same thing with the school district--you can't get hired in the school district because you don't have a California certificate. There are many constraints that are going on, so that I as an individual can't be hired by this school district simply because I don't have a degree. Although I have an honorary doctorate degree, I don't have a B.A. and an M.A. and I don't have a California teacher's certificate. [Laughter] Can you imagine that!

This has to do with the unions protecting their own crew. Yet, at the same time, when you talk to a teacher in a classroom, the teacher is powerless. You can't imagine why they wouldn't have any power, simply because they're such a powerful organization. They're organizationally powerful, but they're individually powerless.

I think that this is the whole problem with everybody in our society; we have given up our individual freedom for the security of the group. As we see this thing happening--this has been an observation (and I really believe it) of my friend Effie Schwarzschild, whose husband came from Wertheim in Germany. He fled when he was ten. They were invited back to Wertheim by the mayor this past summer, and so the whole family went. She sees this whole process that we've been going through in the school district, this powerlessness; nobody

Asawa: being able to make a decision, every person saying "My hands are tied--but don't say I said so, because I'm not in a position to say this. But--" She said that this is absolutely a repeat of Fascism working right into the hands of this country.

The Scramble for Funds

Asawa: It could be deliberate, from the government's point of view of giving piles of money without any order or organization, and letting all these poor people scramble for it and fight for it and discover that they're just as corrupt at the low level as they are at the top level. It's this whole thing of scrambling, and forcing them to have guidelines and to fit into these guidelines in order to get that money. So they're compromising, compromising, compromising, in order to get a few million dollars into this district--incredible. And the meetings that people have to come to and the way they fight over this money is just a very frightening, frightening thing. We've watched this thing. In a way it's fascinating, but it is really frightening.

It's divisive. The whole thing is designed to keep the poor sort of fighting amongst themselves; in the meantime other things are happening. This little piece of money that you can fight over.

Nathan: Do you feel it is almost like a deliberate plot, or is it ineptitude?

Asawa: Well, it's a combination of both. It's a combination of both, but I'm sure that in the meantime, we have the Pentagon and other people who are absolutely exempt from scrutiny. All these things are happening. It all sounds like a plot.

Nathan: One wonders if these things happen because nobody has the sense to pull it together, or is there some evil genius plotting? It's hard for me to accept that.

Asawa: Well, obviously if we go back to Nixon, I think that he was really plotting--he was! And had he not been caught, he would have been successful.

Nathan: You feel there is a real suspicion current.

Asawa: Oh, it's designed to make people suspicious of each other--we discovered that in this proposal, in this whole ESAA thing. We are given \$3.8 million to reduce racial isolation and minority tensions. Do you know how much of that money was put into materials, field trips and consultants?

Nathan: How much?

Asawa: Five thousand dollars.

Nathan: Where did all the rest of it go?

Asawa: Personnel. Jobs. Training the teachers, giving them increment pay, increasing their pay by going to in-service workshops that are worthless.

Nathan: It's all frittered away like this?

Asawa: Here's the proposal. This is the proposal for it. [Showing proposal] By writing our proposal in here--and they're accusing me now of supplanting, that I'm trying to get money for my program (they never refer to Alvarado; they call it the Asawa Project).

Nathan: Who is "they"? The federal level?

Asawa: No, the ESAA community advisory council, and the staff. The staff talks about it as the Asawa Project.

Nathan: You never have used it to benefit yourself.

Asawa: I've never gotten anything out of it from the school district; I've only had a grant from the San Francisco Foundation for the last two years. They haven't kept a commitment for this year, so I don't want to take it.

Nathan: The San Francisco Foundation has not?

Asawa: No--the school district has not. Their match has not been made. So, as long as the school doesn't do it, I won't take the match from the foundation. But I think that the thing about all of this, it's really a vicious thing. (I don't know if it should be on tape, but who cares.)

Nathan: Well, this is the way you understand it--

Asawa: Sure.

Nathan: --and unless you say it, who else is going to say it?

Asawa: Right. We were told up at those meetings all of this. We asked that competent people be hired, we asked that student-initiated programs and teacher-initiated and site-initiated programs be the prime emphasis, within gardening, visual arts and performing arts. We made a specific area we were talking about. They have written the activities in, but they haven't written our goals in. So they are asking for more money. We're still working on this.



Asawa: See, Alvarado really is not interested in staying in business anyway. It was just sort of a catalyst. We don't own anything. We own a typewriter and we own a few tools. We don't have a desk. We don't pay anything for rent. We have a rubber stamp for our return address, we don't have any stationery. People are asking for recommendations on our stationery and we just have to use a rubber stamp; that's all we have. We've never spent anything on it, anything other than bringing artists and materials to the kids.

Nathan: It's more a method than a structure?

Asawa: Right. It's not an organization almost. We have a minimum board, a working board that we can meet with, and we have a meeting that's required once a year. We never spend any time at meetings; we're always out there working.

It seems that they are not interested in children.

Liberation and Learning

Nathan: And yet the project that you've been describing somehow has stimulated people to develop on their own, like the gardeners and the actors group that then developed senior citizens and brought them in--there is so much vitality there.

Asawa: The artists themselves chose the areas they were concerned with, and we said, "Go ahead. Do it!" They're the ones. We talked about it. Youth guidance centers, senior citizens, prisons--we've talked about all this sort of in broad terms and how we want to reach all those. But the artists, having been already in the community and having done these things, were attracted to it because they felt they could work in the areas where they were; it was just a natural. That's why, by keeping it open, I feel as though I don't do any work. If you let everybody function in their capacity, then there's no work for you to do.

Nathan: You sort of liberate them to function as they can?

Asawa: Yes. I think that that's really what learning is.

Nathan: Is that why it's a threat to administrators--because if you do it right, you do yourself out of a job, in a way?

Asawa: I don't even see them as being out of work because then they become liberated to do what they want. It could be a useful function for the total thing. And many of them are very frustrated where they are. They have to look busy if they're going to stay there, and that is sort of the worst state to be in.

Asawa: I think the tragedy of all this is that that's what we are teaching our children--to cheat, to lie and be dishonest and compromise. We're teaching them all of the bad things, and it's all legal because it's all in the guidelines. To fit into the guidelines instead of making guidelines that fit the needs--that is just the thing that we've got to get rid of, fitting into guidelines that have nothing to do with us. Maybe (Governor) Brown's less government and more responsibility on the individual, that's got to happen, because the other thing is killing us. It's going to destroy all of us, really. I'm not emotional about it; it's a practical thing.

What is so sad about it, it's destroying that person, and I just think that that's so sad really. Even the sadder thing is that we are in a period when we have the freedom to be even more, because we have less demand on us.

Nathan: Physical demand?

Asawa: Physical and social. You know, you're not boxed into religion and dress code. All of these things--we have absolutely total freedom at this point, and the sky's the limit, for the first time in our life! We're not utilizing that opportunity, and I think that that's tragic. Everybody's writing a grant, everybody's begging for money; we have become organized beggars. In a way, this is another form of losing our freedom. With the time that is spent to write this proposal, those people should be in the schools dealing with the kids; then we wouldn't need this money.

Nathan: That's right.

"How Do You Live?"

Asawa: But this is money used to sort of keep things stirred and manipulated, manipulating other people. I just feel sad that all those hours that the citizens have to spend at this, they truly should be spending it with their families, instead of being out there at night every week for five hours.

Finally, I'm really coming to the conclusion that the way to solve the problem is to really solve your own problems. It's never going to be solved by somebody else. How to get to that point? The simplest thing has now become the impossible thing. A mother with a child can no longer take care of herself, so that we have to build up a whole organization so that she can be cared for. A simple thing like taking care of your food and taking care of your child and getting him here and getting him there has become an impossible task.

Asawa: But it's easy for her to go out to a meeting--leave her child at a babysitter--and organize and fight and protest and sign petitions, which we have become so skilled at doing now, when really the answer to all of it is to find ways to work. I'm not a spiritualist, but I feel that that's what all these groups that are popping up now are [doing], trying to find that solution of how does one take care of oneself. I think that that's the question that is asked of me; that's really the one question. They say, "How do you do that fountain?" or "How do you do this technique?" But the thing that is much more interesting to them is, "How do you have your family and how do you do your work? How do you get this together?" I think that that really is the most critical question that people should be asking.

Nathan: "How do you live?"

Asawa: Yes, "How do you live?" What we've done is we've deadened all those things that give us pleasure. We don't do those things because we don't have enough time any more to do those things that solve problems. We're looking for solutions that are not workable.

We don't want solutions; that's really what I've come to conclude--nobody wants solutions. If they wanted them, then they could have them very easily; it's very easy to have solutions. That could be challenged, but I feel that there are many things that give you pleasure that absolutely cost you no money, like sitting in the sun, or getting up early enough to see the sun rise (that's free for everybody), the sunset (that's free). I mean, there are a lot of things that are free that can give you pleasure that people have sort of stripped out of their lives because they don't cost anything. They think by getting things they have to pay for, it's going to give them the answers. Those answers are very simple and very free--most of them, many of them are free. Of course, we still have to make a living, make our payments; we have to pay for the car and the mortgage and the trip during the summer--all these realities. I'm not ignoring this, because I have it constantly.

Nathan: It brings us to what you were saying a few moments ago about Governor Brown's attitude that we need to learn to do more with less.

Student RISE Forum: Segregation of Adults and Children

Nathan: You were starting to talk about the ESAA application and the way it's been re-worked again, and then you were getting into some other ideas.

Asawa: The reason we have been involved in the ESAA is because two parents and one community person (Dorice Murphy and Effie Schwarzchild, who's a parent, and myself) tried to work through ESAA. We had our

Asawa: planning meeting and getting parents together, getting students interested and excited and trying to get students involved in making the ESAA student advisory committee active.

We also supported the RISE forum; we had a student RISE forum.

Nathan: RISE forum?

Asawa: When I was on the Wilson Riles Reform in Intermediate and Secondary Education (RISE) Commission, I recommended that throughout the state because we'd never had a student speak up. We wanted really to have students. So, at McAteer High School, the parents sponsored a RISE forum and all the commissioners around this area were invited to be there.

Nathan: Are you on the Riles commission also?

Asawa: Not on the Roth commission but the RISE commission that was completed last May. We worked for ten months on that, and I was the only artist on that; most of them were businessmen, superintendents, principals, teachers. The parents and students got a meeting together and invited us. The only requirement was that we couldn't talk--no adults could talk--which was very good. They gave us a list of priorities and things that they felt were important to the students. So it was a very exciting meeting.

Nathan: Did you get some ideas from the students?

Asawa: Oh yes, very much. Some of them thought that teachers should live in the city; if students had to live in the city, why didn't the teachers live in the city? Which is very logical.

Nathan: Of course it is.

Asawa: And about bathrooms being segregated; the teachers and students--they should not be segregated. And that they should eat together; there should not be a separate lunchroom for the teachers and the students. It should all be integrated. They were really talking sense about things that are so fundamentally wrong with the school system right now. If those things aren't cleared up, no matter how many millions of dollars you bring in, it can't get corrected because those things are basically the things that keep people separated. The real problem is separation, segregation, not among the Blacks and the whites but among adults and children.

Federal Guidelines: Multi-Cultural Activities

Asawa: With ESAA, we had worked on some proposals that we were invited to work on with the community. I had worked at Ben Franklin and Dorice and Effie worked at McAteer. The proposal was very much like the one that started gardening. When we got the word it was turned down, we said, "By whom?" They said, "By Washington." "Who in Washington?" We began to ask questions about who was cutting these things down. They said, "Washington didn't feel that--what had gardening to do with reducing racial tension? What has that to do with it?"

Anyway, it finally got cut down. Then we said, "Why don't you talk to HEW?" So we made an appointment with HEW--Dr. Aguirre here, at 50 Fulton Street--and he said, "Well, you know, the way you do it is you have to speak to your legislators because they make the law." So we went to our legislators. We went to John Burton's office and we went to Leo McCarthy's office. We wrote letters.

Nathan: You went to the state legislators or to the federal, or both?

Asawa: What we did was, we wrote a letter (kind of a mean letter; they considered it mean)--

Nathan: You wrote a mean letter? I find that hard to believe.

Asawa: Well, "mean" being "frank." We sent it to 250 congressmen, state legislators, everybody. We got a response from some of them, from Brademas and some others. Then the community advisory council here was indignant that we didn't go to them first. But we're independent. We're just concerned.

Nathan: Of course you are!

Asawa: So, everybody's hands are tied, so we didn't want to go anywhere to go over it. We set up a meeting with Dr. Alioto and Gina Pennestri from John Burton's office and Dan Waldman. Our first meeting was in Burton's office, with HEW there explaining. HEW said, "We can't force the school district. They do what they want to do." So, we're still not knowing where the controls are. We finally got a meeting with Robert Alioto (School Superintendent) and he's sort of concerned, and CAC is angry that they weren't included in there. It had nothing to do with the CAC; it had to do with policy and more the structure at the top. All this is just sort of going on back and forth, and we've taken every step. The office that has been helping us most--I mean completely--is Dan Waldman and Rick Kropp from Leo McCarthy's office. They have helped us arrange meetings with HEW.

Asawa: We've asked them to help us because we can't get through. So they've helped us--assisted us--in every step. Finally the guidelines that were sort of reduced to paragraphs that we could fit into, are there. Then, on that, we were told that it was permissible but not required. So the school district eliminates part, so that what we're doing is permissible but not required. There are certain things that are required. So they have taken all those requirements and just sort of wiped out. They say, "We can't do these things because of federal guidelines." So we've had a re-definition of the guidelines proposal, which is multi-cultural activities and programs in schools. It deals with bringing skilled people into the schools with the children.

We've also been in contact with Yvette del Prado, who is now the curriculum assistant superintendent in curricula or programs, and with Dr. Robert Alioto; we've kept him informed of what we're doing. Actually, this could make him be very effective; this could help him do what he's talking about.

Nathan: Is this still pending?

Asawa: Oh yes, this is now pending. This is how they had written us in here into this. [Referring to proposal] They've written just the activities. They haven't included our goals, our student initiation--and we feel that is critical. We got somebody to help us write it in their "need," "activities," you know.

Nathan: Format.

Asawa: Format, yes. So we have to follow. They have the gardening; they didn't change that at all. But they claim that all this is going on; it's just that they don't have money to do it. But we think that it can't go on without qualified people. They're asking for more money, but we don't want more money; we want this program intact. It's just a way of using that money better.

Their thrust is to put the money in to change teacher attitudes, if you've ever seen anything as vague as that. But what we're talking about here is to change teachers' attitudes by having something to work with, and involving the teachers and the students in it, rather than saying, "We have this reading material." Teachers all say they need reading material, so they respond to that which has nothing really to do with the children. We're talking about involving the students; we want everything that we've written to go directly to the students, whether it's an in-service, whether it's a workshop, whether it's a field trip or anything else. We're saying we want children to be actively involved in it.

That's all Alvarado has done, to utilize the children's energy and to teach them a skill as they begin to contribute to their own environment. By doing this they contribute to the entire community because the community sees what they've done so that they know what is going on.

Asawa: What we want is to let people know what's going on. We don't want all this mystery. That's why the paper-shuffling, administrating and all of that, is using up all the money that could be used in producing gardens for food and ethnic gardens for festivals, so that people could come together and make food. What brings people together better than to exchange recipes and to do all the preparation?

Nathan: It's so natural.

Counseling and Activities

Asawa: Yes. And this is not a program for reading or for testing or improving the reading level. They're using that, saying that that is the way people will feel better--if they can learn to read better. But we're saying that if we can bring the arts, poetry, and all these together, and combine these things, then you teach them to read, you teach them to draw, and you teach them to bring a thing into a logical format, and you teach them a skill in the meantime while you're doing all these things. We don't feel that we can look at this as counseling, as community involvement, separately. We feel that all these things bring all these things together--that the counseling comes out of the nature of the activity.

Instead of counseling (which is in a way used to focus on problem children), ours is to focus on the entire school and bring the so-called "problem children" into the main stream so they will fit in, will function, will contribute at the level in which they can do it. They can go through this and then come out not necessarily being able to be successful but to be able to join the community.

Nathan: Just make it organic instead of fragmenting it?

Asawa: Right. So that everyone becomes a counselor and it's sort of back and forth, an exchange. Where somebody needs help, somebody else is ready to help. It doesn't become somebody coming into a desk and saying, "Now what is your problem, Johnny? What is it really? Is it your family? Is it bad friends?" Instead of doing that, we bring all of Johnny's bad friends in together and begin to put them into activities. I'm just talking about energy; that's all it is. We're not passing judgment whether it's bad or good; we're just simply using that energy that's there.

Nathan: As you are working with Dr. Alioto in the schools, is the change in the political situation going to make very much difference? There's a new school board president now. Is that going to make any perceptible difference?

Asawa: I think it's the vote that counts, not really who's there. He's in a better position as president, but I think it's the composition of the board. And even then, they're pretty uninformed of day to day activities; they don't know what's going on. I think the critical thing is what's happening to staff, the administrative staff; it's very critical. They're the ones who are doing things. The superintendent doesn't know what's going on out there, and the principals are doing what they want to do too; it's too big, in a way. The principal can say, "You can't do this because the law says this," or the principal can do what he wants to do. I've seen principals who just go ahead and do it--just go around all of the obstacles and they go ahead and do it.

Nathan: So your approach is more school-by-school.

Owning or Serving

Asawa: Yes. But that's pretty risky too. It's all risk, but I think that from the top you have to permit things to happen. As soon as you permit things to happen, and as soon as the board begins to decide that they don't own the schools but are there to be servants--that's the attitude I had as a commissioner; I had a feeling that I'm a servant to the city. It's my job. I think the board has to feel that way. They can't use it as a springboard for another position. They really have to serve the students. The superintendent has to feel the same way. When all these people begin to feel that way, then the attitude of the principals and the attitude of the teachers will change. The ones that I believe in most are the teachers.

Nathan: You think they are susceptible to change?

Asawa: They're critical. They're the most critical because they're the ones with the direct contact with the students.

Nathan: So you try to reach them.

Asawa: Yes--them and the parents. The parents are critical too; it can't happen without the parents.

Nathan: Do you have any thoughts about whether the new mayor (George Moscone) will make any difference in the kinds of things that you're interested in?

Asawa: Oh, I hope so, because I think his outlook is very much to try to unify this city. One of the places you can unify a city is with the schools because every child has to go to school and every neighborhood has a school. And every child has a parent or somebody--guardian. I think that that's sort of where you can reach everybody. That's why I believe that where the schools are, that's the community.

Nathan: Is there any problem in the fact that, presumably, the mayor is not supposed to get his hands on the schools, according to the--

Asawa: The charter?

Nathan: Yes, because the schools are part of a state structure. I'm talking about structure, which I know you don't terribly like, but just thinking of it in that way, the school district is a part of the state structure and the city really does not have authority there. Mayor Joseph Alioto had been criticized for getting into the busing controversy.

Asawa: Yes, he had no business in it. I tried to get him to not do it, and I also tried to get him to reappoint Laurel Glass. He didn't like her either. He's a very bad man in terms of education.

Nathan: But you feel perhaps--I don't want to put words into your mouth, and tell me if I haven't got it right--I gather that you think that Moscone's attitude will be helpful, basically.

Asawa: Yes.

XII ALASKA: RESIDENCY IN A SCHOOL

State Arts and Corridor Arts

Nathan: I have a note that you had gone to Alaska since our last session. What was this occasion?

Asawa: This was the National Endowment for the Corridor Arts, which is for murals in public places. That's in the schools program. It was sponsored with the Alaska State Arts Council. I went for a three-week residency in one of the schools--Sandlake, a school in Anchorage.

We worked in mosaics. They wanted to do a mosaic mural. They wanted to do it with two classes and then let the rest of the school help out. We tried to figure out how to do that. So we did quite a few things while we were there.

Then they had nothing there, so that when I got there I had to gather everything. I brought the tools.

Nathan: What kind of tools did you bring?

Asawa: Well, cutters, a hand chisel and hammer to break the tile. So I had all those fabricated here--made here--before I went, and I picked them up just the day before; they finally got them done. But these all had to be specially made. Then the cutters I got were commercial cutters.

Nathan: Did your daughter go with you?

Asawa: Our daughter Addie Laurie went. She had just graduated from high school and she had time before she went off to UCLA, so she went with me. It was marvelous to have her. She's very competent and she really helped out.

Bakers' Clay Panels and Mosaic

Asawa: We worked with one school and then we did a bakers' clay project with the entire school--made panels for the entire school to hang in their hallway. Then we did a 4x16 mosaic in that three weeks. We just absolutely dashed. We got artists that were going to work in Alaska who came and worked with me, so we had about four artists working on this project as sort of a training. Then parents came in and cut tile. The second and sixth grade classes--two classes--were chosen to do the designing of it, and the other children came in to help them fill in the background. Just because we had so little time, we worked with a sort of traditional thing of Alaska--the animal life and the tundra and the sea life. So we chose something so that we wouldn't have to go into a lot of planning and designing and meetings; these were things that were being studied in the classrooms. We tied it in with the classroom.

All of the drawings were made and then transferred. The sixth grade children transferred the second grade drawings to the boards--panels. They just simply took it and traced the original drawing right on the board. We had a room that we worked continuously in. Then, in the afternoon, we had workshops for teachers from other areas.

We did mask making, paperfolding, milk carton workshop and puppetry. We did all four of those things. These were actually school projects. So we got a lot done.

Nathan: Were there Indian children also?

Asawa: A few, a few. Not many. It's a mostly white school. We had a child that had come from Deer, Alaska--way up there. There are no schools up there; his family came down for the school year. That's what they do with them. I don't know how successful that is.

Seeing Alaska

Nathan: It's difficult, I'm sure. Did you get to see Anchorage and other parts of Alaska while you were there?

Asawa: We went to the Portage Glacier and we went to Mount McKinley and went on a beautiful eight-hour train ride to McKinley State Park. We went up then and saw the animals; we saw a wolf and the white sheep.

Nathan: Did you see the red fox?

Asawa: We didn't see a red fox. We saw a bear. We saw the ones with the big horns--elk?

Nathan: Yes, or moose, and the big horned sheep?

Asawa: Yes, we saw the sheep. In fact, what we did is we saw a whole family crossing in front of us on this highway going to the other mountain range. We also saw a wolf chasing them. We saw the whole experience of a wolf chasing them, and this was never seen before by any of those people who guided us--took us on this bus ride. They had never seen that.

Nathan: Did you feel like yelling to the sheep, "Watch out! There's a wolf."

Asawa: Yes, yes. We saw about six of them and we saw the wolf going across like this [gesture] chasing them. Then, they came over and they came right in front of us, and that was the thing that saved them.

Nathan: Did the wolf hold back then?

Asawa: The wolf ran off into the hills. But we know that the wolf would not take anyone that was healthy--only the ones that would fall, that would be his food.

Nathan: Maybe it's not fair to side against the wolf.

Asawa: No, no. The wolf is not that aggressive, we were told. Alaska is so beautiful. It has so many problems. The people are really very nice there.

Nathan: Did you bring back some experience for yourself from Alaska?

Asawa: From Alaska? Well, I'd love to go back there to do some water colors. It's so beautiful, just so incredible.

Nathan: You got out onto Glacier Bay? Did you go up that area at all?

Asawa: I don't know quite. I went to the Portage Glacier at the end of Cook's Island--that area--and saw the glaciers. It was almost artificial it was so incredible. You've been there?

Nathan: Yes. But again, just on a brief trip, and there's so much more to see. The taiga was what fascinated me--all those little tiny stick-like trees.

Asawa: Oh, those are old, old trees.

Nathan: Yes. They're old trees, but because of the permafrost, they can't grow any bigger. We saw bluebells that were bigger than old trees. Flowers come up in the Spring like this [gesture] above the trees.

Asawa: Well, and the cabbages in the backyard. We stayed with Clark and Melinda Gruening. (Clark is a legislator; he's the grandson of the Senator Gruening.) They had a garden in the back. They had cabbages this big. [Gestures]

Nathan: Really? [Laughter] Your arms are about two feet across?

Asawa: Well, about eighteen inches.

Nathan: Did they have potatoes?

Asawa: Delicious potatoes! Delicious cauliflower and brussels sprouts and zucchini. It's just such a short growing period; I guess they plant in May or June and then about the end of September it's all over. Everything just grows and grows and grows.

Nathan: Yes. Did you feel that they were in sympathy with some of your ideas about art?

Asawa: Oh yes. She was responsible for asking me to come there. She wanted me to come and she also wants me to exhibit something next summer.

Nathan: Do you think you may be able to do that?

Asawa: I'll just send her something, yes.

Nathan: It would be nice for you to take it up yourself.

Asawa: [Laughter] Actually, they asked me if I would come for two weeks, to be considered for a two-week thing in Juneau. But I know the summer here is going to be horrendous, I think. I just didn't want to be away from San Francisco.

XIII A LOOK AT THE LANIER FAMILY

Nathan: Could you say something about your husband's family?

Asawa: Some of it may not be accurate, but this is all sort of word of mouth, although Albert's family is well documented and they have a very interesting genealogy. The Lanier family left France; they were Huguenots and they left because of persecution and went to England. They were court musicians for one of the kings; I can't remember which king--King James? They came to this country in about 1670, to Virginia. Albert's great-great-great-grandfather was Louis Lanier, who fought in the Revolution. When the war was over, George Washington gave his sword to Louis Lanier. Louis migrated to Georgia and took a second wife. (Maybe this is incorrect; if it is, we can correct it. You should probably ask him to tell it because he knows it so much better.) He is descended from Miss Chamberlain, the second wife of Louis and is a distant cousin of George Washington.

Sidney Lanier and he have a common grandfather; they're cousins. His grandmother--his father's mother--remembered Sherman's march through Georgia.

Nathan: Marching through Georgia!

Asawa: Marching through Georgia. They came and they took everything. But they told them that anything that falls out of the wagon--the corn--they can keep. So she went under and shook it so that some fell through cracks. This is one of the stories. He has a very interesting, interesting sort of southern background.

His father, Hudson Lanier, was district attorney for many years. His sister is married to Lawton Pearson, who has I guess probably one of the largest peach farms in the world. His father developed the Pearson Hialeah, which is a peach which has become one of the commercial peaches that's shipped to the east. So it's a very interesting family.

Nathan: In a sense, I gather that your husband has always been a rather liberated man; that he was not one that held to the old, "the wife must be at home and must not do other things."

Asawa: Oh no, no. He was very supportive. That was one of the interesting things, when I went to talk to Albers and when Albert went to talk to Albers. It was sort of at the end, when we were leaving, and I said, "You know, I really want a large family." He said, "Fine."

Nathan: "He" being--?

Asawa: Albers. I really wanted to have children around. He said, "That's fine." And when Albert went to talk to Albers, Albers said, "Don't ever let her stop doing her work." So, in a way, it was getting two things. So my husband has been very supportive throughout the whole thing. In fact, it's really his encouragement that has been very good, and also his knowledge of architecture. Although we've never collaborated, he's the one who finally had to calculate the curve of the pattern for the Hyatt Fountain.

Nathan: Yes. I was wondering about the engineering of some of these things, the heavy material that you use.

Asawa: Well, he calculated how those panels were to be built. The pattern-maker built it, but there's always somebody who has to figure things out or the angles of the fountain or just the way it's going to be put together--all those things that in a way I can't really do by myself.

We both feel that we should utilize all the resources that we can get, so that whenever I need help on something I can't cope with, I really go to the person who knows how. Like, if I have a certain amount of money for a project, it would be nice for me to keep all that money, so that I'd figure things out and sort of bump along. But it's much better to take that money and use it on people who know how to do it--pay them to get it done so that you get a better product. Even at the end, if there's very little money for myself, we have a good thing out of it. If each person feels he's contributed his, then we will produce a good thing.

Nathan: If you show a respect for the qualities of others?

Asawa: Right; that's very important. That's really all I'm saying about the schools or government, is that we really should use our resources. We should not waste them; we really shouldn't waste people. I think that that's our most important resource--not money but people.

Nathan: Yes, that's true. There is much more we could talk about, but an artist's time is particularly precious. Thank you for sharing your memories and experience, your ideas and vision. Thank you for these rewarding interviews.

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NOTE: See also, Albert Lanier, "Architecture, Gardens, and the Individual" at the end of this volume.



1971

Albert Lanier and his wife Ruth Asawa
on the deck at their home in San Francisco

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Albert Lanier

ARCHITECTURE, GARDENS, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Time and Setting February 16, 1979
of the Interview: 1116 Castro Street, San Francisco

Conduct of the
Interview:

Albert Lanier was interviewed at his home. When a downstairs power tool sent buzzing noises into the tape recorder, the interview shifted from a rear sunroom to the main living room. In the nearby kitchen, women family members of various ages had gathered at the long table for tea, conversation, and laughter. Throughout the session, Lanier was thoughtful, at ease, and quietly amused. He listened with careful attention when his two-year-old grandson ran in to explain how he would build and grade a road for his toy truck. "He's just amazing to watch," Lanier said later.

As the talk turned to architecture, he praised work that was unique, internally consistent, and a direct expression of individual vision and personality. He admired John Funk, Bernard Maybeck, Louis Kahn, and Mies van der Rohe, and the many unknown builders of barns and farm buildings in Georgia and California. Lanier pointed out the special delight of gardens, especially "folk gardens," some beautiful, some eccentric, some with flowers and trees, some with plaster figures, but all at the opposite pole from an anxious and careful conformity.

He took aim at some architectural absurdities. When he and his wife, Ruth, visited a white-painted wooden Georgia church he had known in childhood, they laughed helplessly at the sight of a front porch and exterior stairs carefully fitted with "livid green Astroturf." He shook his head over San Francisco's devotion to Victorian architecture with its ready-made wooden gingerbread decorations and tiny rooms. Must new city houses also be Victorian in order to "blend"? He thought not.

When it came to building a life, Lanier said that he chose consistency, stability, and independence. The idea was to care for oneself and one's family and then do a little more--reach out into the community to work with others on common problems--and manage not to be too solemn about it all. He brushed aside the notion that he might be called a "liberated man" because of the way he has participated in family life with a wife who is both family-minded and a celebrated and hardworking artist. On the contrary, he said, "I think it would be really dreadful to be stuck with a wife that

didn't have her own interests, some of them divergent from yours," someone who would have to be entertained.

With his lean, intelligent face and trim chin whiskers, Lanier has been told that he resembles a patriarch of an earlier day. Smiling, he recalled how a friend once sent him a letter addressed to "Abe Lincoln of Castro Street." The letter was delivered.

Harriet Nathan
Interviewer-Editor

December, 1979
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

I PARENTS AND EARLY YEARS

[Date of Interview: February 16, 1979]

Lanier: I was born in Candler County, Georgia, in an old town called Metter, in 1927. I was the fourth child of Weylud Hudson Lanier and Bernice Bird Lanier. This little town was seventy miles outside of Savannah. Savannah was the city. My father was and is an attorney. My mother--well, she was a mother and she had six children of which I was the fourth. I had one older brother who had died before I was born and two older sisters. Then I had a younger brother who is now deceased and one younger sister. My father is still living. He's ninety years old and won't last much longer. I grew up in the Depression, was unaware of the Depression.

Nathan: Was this farming country?

Lanier: It was rural, very rural. I lived in the county seat. My father before I was grown became the equivalent of the district attorney. He had been at one time judge of the city court and then he became district attorney for a middle judicial circuit of Georgia, which was five rural counties. My mother's big interests were in gardening and she probably injected that in me at an early age, although at the time I think I hated it because I had to work weekends picking off dead pansies or cutting off dead roses or turning over the soil or something like that. But both parents were very farm-garden-oriented, although that interest really wasn't embraced wholeheartedly by my father until he was quite old, in fact, until he was elderly. I went through the public schools in that little town.

Nathan: Could I ask you a little about the conversation at home, since your father was something of a public official? Did he talk about community affairs or state politics?

Lanier: Not so much state politics as maybe local politics. It was more on a local basis. You see, I was born five years before Roosevelt was elected and was grown by the time Roosevelt died, so Roosevelt was very big in our minds and the New Deal was very big, the WPA was very big.

Nathan: Did you feel that your parents supported Roosevelt?

Lanier: Supported him? Oh, yes. They were lifelong Democrats, both of them. They really were not rednecks--rednecks in the sense that much of the South has been caricatured. They were both college graduates. My mother had been a speech teacher and I guess before I came along had even worked in that field. By the time I came along she was strictly a housewife and a gardener. My father was very busy, obviously, earning a living for a big family.

I say that I wasn't aware of the Depression. I think I wasn't aware of it because everybody was involved in it and there really weren't the contrasts in a little town like that that you would find maybe if you'd gone up to the city. Everybody was moderately poor, so that you weren't very aware of the rich or the terribly poor.

At a very early age I became interested in art. I don't know where that influence would have come from other than perhaps my mother, but maybe to a greater extent my oldest sister who didn't major in art but she certainly took a lot of art courses.

Wartime Schooling and Service

Lanier: When the war started, which was 1941, I guess, I was by that time in high school, and the summer of '42 I spent at the University of North Carolina where I studied drama. It was a program for high school students and they would have permitted me to stay there and continue college. However, I went back for one more year of high school and as soon as I was out, which would have been in late May, I enrolled in Georgia Tech in Atlanta where I thought I would major in architecture.

Nathan: Was this your first venture away from home essentially?

Lanier: Other than the summer at the University of North Carolina. Then the war was really in full swing and there was great concern to get me educated, I think, before I was shot, and I stayed there until I was eighteen. By that time I was a junior in college.

Nathan: You were very accelerated, weren't you?

Lanier: Yes, but I had started college when I was barely sixteen and I went twelve months a year. There were no summer breaks. It was on a very expedited system at that time, you probably remember.

I enlisted in the Navy at eighteen because I was going to be drafted into the Army if I hadn't enlisted in the Navy. That was a marvelous break for me because I literally had had no--I don't think I'd even had adolescence, I was so pushed into getting an education. In the Navy I went off for boot camp to Great Lakes in Illinois and from there I was sent over my protests to a radar school in Florida. After I was through with the radar school, I was shipped to Miami to get a boat to be the radar operator.

Nathan: Why did you not want to do radar?

Lanier: I had been in a technical school. I was totally disinterested in electronics, radar. Considering the alternative, looking back on it, I was very lucky that they had insisted that I go to radar school because the only other thing for beginning sailors at that point was hospital corpsmen who landed with the Marines. They landed without guns and the mortality rate was astronomical. At any rate, I went to radar school. I didn't know anything about radar. I still didn't know anything about radar when I got out. It would have been a disaster if I had ever been a radar operator for a ship. But by that time the war was really winding down. It was a matter of the war being over with Japan. The war was over with Germany. It was still continuing in the Pacific, but I succeeded in getting assigned to 7th Naval District Headquarters where I worked for the library and planned parties for the Navy. [laughter] I worked for some very fine people like the Commander of the 7th Naval District. When that was over I went to BUPERS in Washington, also in recreation. From there I was discharged in August, 1946.

Art Classes and Colleges

Lanier: While I was stationed in Washington, I attended American University art classes. It was my first real experience with a museum, the Phillips Gallery. I saw Paul Klee paintings there, thought I had discovered this unknown painter. I saw my first Henry Moore sculpture, drawings, the Air Raid Shelter series.

Lanier: As soon as I was discharged, I think a week later, I was back at Georgia Tech to complete my education, except it didn't work nearly as well for me as it had worked before going into the Navy. I spent another year there but discovered in the architectural library a catalog of Black Mountain College and discovered that the chairman of the department's son either had gone or was there at that time. Several of us took the weekend and went up to see the college and decided on the spot that we were going to all leave Georgia Tech and go to Black Mountain College; that would have been Si Sillman, Forrest Wright, and myself. I did do that in the fall of '47.

Nathan: What did your parents think about this?

Lanier: They knew nothing about it, but if that was what I wanted to do, then that was okay. I'm sure they thought it was a mistake, but they let me do it--they paid for me to do it.

Nathan: They expected their children to go to college?

Lanier: Oh, yes. With the exception of myself, they all got degrees, at least one degree and several degrees in the case of some. At any rate, I went to Black Mountain and stayed there for a full twelve months which would have been a school year plus a summer. That is where I met Ruth. Josef Albers was a teacher that I studied with there, so was Buckminster Fuller. It was the summer of '48, which I believe was his first teaching experience; he had never taught before. So it was a very exciting summer.

Nathan: What did he do for you?

Lanier: Well, by this time I was preparing to leave there and I was coming to San Francisco for a year to work, not in a building trade but I was going to work in the various building trades; that was part of my graduation plan from Black Mountain College. I was going to become one of the few graduates of Black Mountain College. I was going to do that for a year and then I was going to go back to Black Mountain College where I would graduate and I don't know what I was going to do then. But as it turned out, I never returned to Black Mountain College after the year in San Francisco.

Finding Architecture

Nathan: Did you actually have a chance to work in the different trades?

Lanier: I worked only as a carpenter's apprentice and the rains came in November or December. Work was virtually unobtainable and finally in late December or the first of the year I went to work for an

Lanier: architect and found it terribly exciting and I've been working ever since. I went to work for Mario Corbett who is known for his domestic architecture and he was interesting. He hired good people. He lived a hand-to-mouth existence just as architects still do. But it was a good experience.

Nathan: What was there about architecture that appealed to you?

Lanier: Well, I think it was that you could do everything that you could do, say, in sculpture. But it had a use. When I grew up in the South, a career in art was not a suitable profession, probably still isn't a suitable profession for a man. Art was something that your maiden aunt did, but men didn't go into art. I think there was some excitement about building too. My father was always building things or having things built.

Looking back at the time that I started architectural school, it was a terribly small department because everybody was in the Army, everybody was away, so we had a very high ratio of teachers to the people that were there. It was a very fortunate time and because they were so short of students, they would even let a freshman take sophomore, junior, and in rare cases senior classes--it was a department that was open twenty-four hours a day. You could work straight through. You could work all weekend if you wanted to and I very often did. There were some stupid courses but I managed to get through them. I never graduated, of course, from anything and came to feel that it wasn't really important that I graduate.

Nathan: You were speaking of the artistic aspect. Did you have any sort of social vision in architecture?

Lanier: I don't think I had very much social vision. If I did, it was certainly a very naive one. No, I didn't have social visions. I didn't think I was going to be of great service to humanity by designing buildings. I think I aspired to build beautiful buildings, but I don't think that there was very much thought about social good.

II VIEWS OF GEORGIA

Nathan: Is there a very strong architectural tradition in the part of Georgia where you were?

Houses and Churches

Lanier: No, absolutely no tradition. If it had a tradition, they had long since abandoned it and the tradition would have been of strictly utilitarian, very crude, very primitive, plain buildings and that disappeared--began to disappear--I think even in the Twenties. In fact, it had a flurry of more grand type buildings in the Twenties but by the time the war was over, postwar, it totally disappeared. Everybody built themselves little yellow brick, purple brick, red brick bungalows with aluminum sash or steel sash and they completely abandoned the dignity that had been found in their farmhouses or their barns or their utilitarian buildings.

Nathan: How about courthouses and public places?

Lanier: They tended to hark back to something from Virginia or had columns or a clock tower. But that was a thing apart. Just as the churches, beginning probably in the Twenties, took on great airs of style and they abandoned the little white frame church that was just a gabled roof and maybe a steeple, a front porch and a simple flight of stairs. Those got abandoned, and they had social halls, Sunday school wings, lots of things in special places. They could have acoustical tile and avoid all of those wooden walls that had to be painted and repainted, if they were ever painted in the first place, and there are a few of them that are still unpainted. But those things got abandoned because we wanted to be just like the rest of the country.

Lanier: We wanted California ranch houses to live in and California houses, as interpreted in the South, well, they aren't--California shouldn't be blamed for those. They're built as California ranch houses but most of our ranch houses have nothing to do with California ranch houses either. Their interpretation was always executed in brick because brick is the suitable material, that's the good material, and wood frame is a poor material in their eyes and a brick house was a status symbol, plus brick is plentiful. A lot of it's manufactured there.

Nathan: You were speaking, in passing, of the churches. Was the church a very strong influence?

Lanier: Very strong, and it still is a strong influence all over the South.

Nathan: Is that Baptist?

Lanier: Oh, it's all Protestant denominations--Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, primitive Baptist, to a lesser extent Episcopalian; or except maybe in places like Charleston or Savannah, Episcopalian would be big, but out in the rural areas there were relatively few Episcopal churches.

A Cemetery Called Rosemary: Four Generations of Laniers

Nathan: Do they each have a burial ground or cemetery?

Lanier: They did; the old ones did. In the case of my father's family, there are many generations in one cemetery which is called Rosemary and that's out on a sand hill and when Ruth and I were there recently we stopped by and spent a few minutes. Did I tell you that story about that little church that's there? It's a very crude, primitive church.

Nathan: Is this one that you went to when you were a child?

Lanier: No, I only went there for funerals, like my grandparents' funerals. It was out in the country. But the little old church sits there, very well-painted, very white. [pauses] Nothing's really changed, at least from the outside--didn't go inside--except the front porch which is wood framing, and the two flights of steps are carpeted in a livid green astroturf. [laughter] Ruth and I stood there and laughed and laughed and laughed! Someone had made a nice contribution and they had "fixed up" that front porch. [more laughter]

Nathan: You were saying that there were several generations of Laniers there?

Lanier: Yes, my grandfather and my great-grandfather and, of course, some of my father's brothers and some of their children, so it has to be four generations that are buried in that cemetery. My grandfather would be William Lanier and his father was Richard Lanier. I don't really know. I think it was post-revolution, maybe the 1790s, that the Lanier family came to Georgia and they came in stages from Virginia--at first to North Carolina and then down into Georgia which my particular branch comes from. They were French Huguenots. They came by way of England to Virginia; they arrived in Virginia in 1680.

Nathan: What was the motive for their leaving?

Lanier: Well, they left France over the Religious Freedom Act and they apparently were musicians and some of them had even been court musicians in England. I guess they wanted to reap their fortunes that were going to be here in America. I really have studied that history very little. There is an enormous book that members of my family have on the Lanier family, but I've never done anything more than peruse it.

Nathan: Were there others who followed the arts besides you?

Lanier: In my immediate family?

Nathan: Yes. You spoke of the musicians and I wondered whether that artistic interest continued.

Lanier: No, I don't think so. I think they deteriorated very fast into farmers and preachers. My father liked to say that many of them were in the penitentiary and more of them should be [laughter] when he would get an inquiry from a very fancy lady researching her ancestry. He tells them that they're farmers, a few lawyers, preachers, many of them in the penitentiary and more of them should be. [more laughter] And he never gets a follow-up! In my immediate family there are teachers. I have a sister who teaches journalism in a little college in Georgia. I have another sister who is also a teacher and I guess her specialty is something like home economics, except she really is terribly interested in the arts and has involved herself in that in recent years. That older sister who probably had an influence on me as a child still paints and does not consider herself a professional except that she's not a maiden aunt. Certainly what goes for art or art involvement in much of the South or in the rural South--charming water colors, very nice little drawings, very unpretentious.

Mother's Family

Nathan: But that impulse is very strong?

Lanier: Unpretentious things, yes. Probably more from my mother's side of the family than my father's side. My mother's side were Birda. Her father was a farmer. Most of my mother's family and my father's family were large families, like eight and ten children. The same land has been in my mother's family maybe for five or six generations.

Nathan: What did they raise?

Lanier: They raised cotton; in later years (but not the Bird family) tobacco. My Grandfather Bird would have nothing to do with tobacco. My Grandfather Bird was an interesting man. He was an agnostic. I don't think you could say he was an atheist, but he was certainly an agnostic. He had nothing to do with the churches, but he supported all of them--I mean he contributed heavily to them, but he had no involvement with them. My Grandmother Bird was terribly religious. She was a Baptist, but she had to go strictly alone, except Grandpa had to pitch in money.

He also didn't smoke. He didn't drink. He didn't travel. Neither of them, for instance, ever drove an automobile. They had to have a chauffeur because they never mastered that. I don't think they ever even tried. But he was an interesting, introverted man who simply had no truck with organized religion, except that he contributed money to them.

Nathan: Was he a scholar, by way of being a reader?

Lanier: No, I don't think so. I don't think he was a scholar. He really believed in taking care of his land and his family and really I don't know how he and my grandmother ever got together with her religious bent, but they did.

Nathan: Maybe she early had dreams of bringing him around.

Lanier: I think music was important to our family. It was quite important to our family. Aunts were musicians--you know, southern musicians.

Knowing Black People in the South

Nathan: I see. Growing up in Georgia, were you at all aware of racial differences?

Lanier: Oh, I was very aware of the differences. I guess the population would have been very close to 50 percent Black in that part of the South. It may have even at one time been higher than 50 percent. But we had a relationship with the people, with Black friends. I say we had a relationship with them; I'm very aware of it here that we have very little relations with Black people. I mean you may have a few professional friends or someone that you know slightly, but there I knew many, many Black people.

Nathan: On a daily basis?

Lanier: On a daily basis. Of course, they were doing things like cooks and farmers and, at least at that period, I don't think that there really was a great problem. For instance, I was tutored in Latin by a Black kid who did very well in Latin, much better than I ever did.

Nathan: The children were all in school together?

Lanier: They were in segregated schools. The highest position for a Black person would probably have been to be a minister. Maybe the undertaker would have been important. But beyond that, the teacher was the highest that you could go. They weren't called teachers; they were called professors. Many of them were very devoted people and very good teachers. I often wonder and, of course, dependent on who those teachers were, if the Black kids weren't getting an education that was superior to what we were getting, even at that time. Of course, I think that's another problem, that even in the white schools the teachers were very devoted people; that was a very important job that they had.

Teachers, Gardens, School Plays

Nathan: Were they relatively well trained do you think?

Lanier: Oh, yes, they had to have degrees and their credentials and all of that, but they were also very devoted and they were terribly respected. You simply didn't mess around with a teacher and that's totally changed in forty years, totally changed. I mean a teacher is like a postman today. Many of them look at it as a job and, in turn, they are looked at as any other workman. The teacher is not the big thing that the teacher was when I was a kid.

Lanier: Latin was not something that you chose in high school; you took Latin. You certainly had to take Latin if you wanted to go to college. It was unheard of that you would go to college if you hadn't had Latin and that was true not only in the white schools. It was true in the Black schools.

Of course, there was no such thing as "art" in those schools at that time. Music was a big thing but not art, not visual arts. It was limited to a few posters and maybe a little lettering.

Nathan: How did you make contact with your tutor? How did you find each other?

Lanier: He actually worked for my mother as a yard boy. He worked in the garden. It was a part-time job. We became friends and he helped me with Latin--not while he was working in the garden. When that was over we'd have a little Latin session and maybe I worked with him in the garden. I've forgotten. Joe McClain was his name. You see, my mother tried to garden so much that she had to have help in the garden.

Nathan: How big an area would that have been?

Lanier: I guess it probably wasn't more than a quarter of an acre, but to me it seemed just enormous and our house was on a much bigger piece of land. The intensive garden was probably a quarter of an acre big and this was a flower garden.

Nathan: Not vegetables?

Lanier: Those were separate gardens! [laughter] Those were separate gardens.

Nathan: So your house must have been full of flowers.

Lanier: Yes, it was always full of flowers. She supplied flowers to the town for many, many years--to the town, to the church. That's where you displayed your flowers, at the church--plus the flower shows, of course. It had the most delicious odor--the house--when a flower show was impending because it was filled with all of these blossoms getting ready to go to the flower show.

Nathan: Did you perhaps get an esthetic view from this?

Lanier: Yes, yes, I think I did. I crave it very much today, a garden that size. I'd even pick off dead pansies, except I still don't like pansies. [laughter] I don't like pansies!

Nathan: They come and go!

Lanier: They come and go and they need to have them all picked off every few days so that they keep blooming and I really don't like to get into that. [laughter] I'm prejudiced against pansies.

Nathan: In your grammar school and high school days were there any teachers who you felt were--

Lanier: There were very good teachers, terribly good.

Nathan: Any who had a special effect on you or who meant a lot to you?

Lanier: One was an English teacher who ran the drama for our school, a woman named Evelyn McNear, and I'm still in very loose contact with her. Earlier, a marvelous woman--who finally ended up teaching math--was named Dora King, a marvelous teacher. We had a much higher percentage of teachers who really reached the kids than I feel we have today. We had some lemons too. We had some awful ones, but the percentage of the good ones I feel was much higher. They tended to be women because fewer men went into teaching at that time at the secondary level. But they were very good. It was their career, it was a real career for them. Another good English teacher would have been Edna Hendricks. [pauses] At any rate, there were many of them.

Nathan: Were the school plays important?

Lanier: Very important, a very important kind of thing. We performed for ourselves, but it was the entertainment; it was the event. I mean we didn't have the choice of running down to the Alcazar or running to the Curran or whatever was happening. The only things that happened were what we made ourselves, except maybe for the competition between high schools which took place annually.

Nathan: Do you mean athletics?

Lanier: Well, no.

Nathan: Debate?

Lanier: Oh, I wasn't involved in the athletics at all. Debate, drama competitions, one-act plays. Then there'd be the annual production, the senior play, the junior play. It was really quite intense all year. The auditorium in the town was the school auditorium. It was really used.

Nathan: All of the families would come?

Lanier: All families came, all families came. It was the event. That, I think, has totally disappeared even in the South. It certainly happens very rarely here.

Nathan: Did you have any touring companies coming through town?

Lanier: No, I don't ever remember any. Before we had our first movie house, sometimes movies toured. I don't remember. The Dixie Theater came in quite early. I think the matinees may have been a nickel. There was a cheaper price for the matinee, the Saturday matinee. But I think evenings maybe were a dime. You maybe got in at half price for the afternoon. There were always cowboy movies on Saturday. Saturdays were always devoted to cowboy movies. [laughter]

Nathan: Was there a local library? Did you hang out at the library?

Lanier: Yes, we had a public library which was really set up by the WPA. I was great friends with the librarians who were women I'd known all my life, neighbors. Two sisters had WPA positions and they were the librarians and had, I'm sure, absolutely no training as librarians, but did a job. There was a summer reading program. When you're out of school you would get stars for how many books you read and that too was very important, much more important than our libraries are today. I think maybe that in lots of ways there were some side benefits of the Depression.

Nathan: Was there much visiting back and forth with families?

Lanier: Yes, Sundays were devoted to church and family. There was lots and lots of family. Sunday was visit day.

Nathan: Out of this community then, you got into the Navy and to Black Mountain and then to San Francisco?

Lanier: That's right, I jumped all the way to San Francisco.

III A YEAR OR SO IN SAN FRANCISCO

Nathan: What made you think of San Francisco?

Lanier: I had a friend at Black Mountain College; her name was Peggy Tolk-Watkins. Peggy had lived in San Francisco during the war, was a New Yorker, told me that in San Francisco and North Beach you could get a, I don't know, a four-course dinner with a bottle of red wine for seventy-five cents or maybe it was a dollar. Of course, that had disappeared by the time I arrived there. But I decided to spend a year in San Francisco.

Nathan: Were you and Ruth married at this time yet?

Marriage and Living Space

Lanier: No, but we were married in San Francisco. She went back to Black Mountain for that year that I was here and at the end of the summer of '49 she returned and we were married here in a loft on Jackson Street which is where Golden Gateway sits today. Out on Jackson is where we lived that first year in a 25 X 60' loft with a bathroom and no kitchen, no bedrooms, only one big space and a bathroom. We lived there for a year until babies were imminent at which point we moved into a three-room apartment so that we would have a more normal set-up for the babies, although we enjoyed the loft very much.

Nathan: Yes, that sounds wonderfully romantic and right for young people.

Lanier: That's right.

Architecture, Satisfactions and Taste

Nathan: You were already involved in architecture at this time?

Lanier: Yes. I just continued working actually for maybe a year and a half for Mario Corbett. Then I left and maybe for eight months tried with another young man to have our own office. When that became totally impossible I then went back to work for an architectural firm. By '52, I think, 1952, I went to work for John Funk, a terribly good architect. I worked for John Funk for eight years before forming my own office for a second time, which I've been involved in ever since--seventeen, eighteen years now--since I formed a partnership with Paul Sherrill which is still the partnership that I'm in.

Nathan: What aspects of architecture were you particularly interested in?

Lanier: Well, always design. Obviously, I'm not terribly interested in making money or I would have made a lot more! [laughter]

Nathan: Tell me what you are most interested in.

Lanier: I think I'm most interested in gardening, to tell you the truth. [laughter]

Nathan: You find gardening satisfying?

Lanier: Well, I think I'm interested in satisfactions I derive from my work. I love to go back and see jobs that I worked on twenty years ago. I enjoy the relationship that I have with people that I've done a good job for, and I've come to realize that there are many compensations that I'm going after other than money. If it had been very important to me I would have done something about it a long time ago and I'm doing what I'm doing because that's what I want to do. As you know, architecture is very unlucrative, certainly in small offices it is. In bigger offices it is possible to even achieve a professional income--in the big offices.

I'm not very interested in planning. I really am interested in the specifics; I'm not interested in the general. I'm interested in transforming this little spot into something complete. It would be nice if it relates to its neighbors, but very often it can't relate to its neighbors. If it related to its neighbors it would just be another dismal building and that's too big a price to pay for that relationship. I think you can still be kind to your neighbors without aping them or without--a term that is very important in planning or very loved by planners--"blending." Very often in the city and the towns in any urban situation, if you really blend with it, you're blending with cement asbestos shingle

Lanier: and I'm not willing to do that. Currently in San Francisco the concern of neighborhoods, and to some extent the planning department, is that we relate everything to Victorian architecture because San Francisco still has so much Victorian stuff left and it's terribly fashionable to love Victorians.

Nathan: Do you love Victorians?

Lanier: No, I don't love Victorians. I like the high-ceiling space in them. I hate the meanness of the room sizes. I can't stand all those walls. It really bothers me. If I was given my choice between three mean little rooms, I will opt for one decent room anytime.

Nathan: Back to the loft?

Lanier: Back to the loft. I've spent practically all my working time in very big spaces. [interruption]

Nathan: You were just talking about your preference for a space--

Lanier: --space, a big space. Victorians were often cluttered up with incredibly ugly features, both externally and internally--very busy, ornate things, ugly ornate things. I'm not going to be beholden to that junk. I'm sure in Victorian times when these things were built there was the equivalent of Goodman Lumber Company; that's the kind of thing you can pick up off the shelves. You know how we're incensed today by the stuff that comes off the shelves of Goodman Lumber Company. Well, that really was the Goodman Lumber Company ornament and trim and features of the time and you bought them and you had them.

So I think there's really too much concern with faithfulness to something that really should be analyzed on its own merits. If you look at it that way--I think planning is a hokey thing; I really think it's a hokey thing, a hokey thing for me. It's too general. I don't like it. I hate guidelines. I think that good buildings are sometimes done despite guidelines, but I think it is almost never that a good building is done because of guidelines.

Nathan: Do you feel that the creativity gets lost?

Lanier: That's right. I guess I'm really coming off as a real anarchist. [laughter]

Nathan: You sound like an architect more than a businessman. That's the way it sounds to me [laughter] and it certainly has great appeal. I gather you do not like Victorian ornament. Is there a kind of ornament you like or are you anti-ornament?



1961

Courtyard of Pearson House,
Fort Valley, Georgia

*Photograph by Rondall Partridge
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Lanier: No, I'm not anti-ornament at all. I love beautiful ornament. If you can't afford beautiful ornament, I think it better be without it; you're better off without it. At least you've got the space, the volume. But if you can't afford really good-looking mouldings or trim or features or ornament, then it's better to have none. I believe that you don't do it in a spot. You don't do it in the front entrance or in the living room. You do it all over and if you can't afford to do it all over, better not to have it anywhere. I think a building has to be consistent. You have to know that you're in the same building throughout all of its parts. That's to be desired as far as I'm concerned, that it should be of a piece, not a Victorian room and a rustic room [laughter] and maybe a French Provincial room.

Nathan: Of the things that you have done that give you satisfaction, are there any particular houses or buildings that you like especially?

Lanier: I like my sister's house that I did in Georgia. I like most of the houses that I've done.

Nathan: Have you built in the San Francisco area?

Lanier: Yes, very many in San Francisco. I'm working on--I don't even know--four or five at the present time that tend to be small houses. We can't afford big ones. The biggest house, I guess, that I ever designed is my sister's house, which is down in Georgia and it would be impossible here except for someone very, very wealthy. They don't seem to come to me. [laughter]

Nathan: Are there any architects whose work you especially admire?

Lanier: I admire John Funk's work very much. In admiring them I'm not sure that I want to try to do things that are similar myself, but certainly Maybeck I think is important to me. In big buildings, Louis Kahn, I'm very interested in. I'm even interested in Mies van der Rohe. [pauses] And I like those farm buildings in Georgia. [laughter] I'd like them in California too if you can still find one. It's very interesting driving through the countryside here--how beautiful barns are and how squalid the new ranch house is. I mean squalid to me.

Nathan: Are you thinking of the feeling of space that you were talking of earlier?

Lanier: Simplicity of form of the building (the barn), not a complex form, whereas the house is very often formless. It's an assemblage of Goodman Lumber Company's. [laughter] It's green stucco or it has a horrible little exterior wainscoting of brick or lava rock--just awful; not of a piece at all. Maybe if they are interested in things

Lanier: Japanese it even has a little pergola at the front door. Just awful things. It's what's fashionable at the time or whatever the farmer considers fashionable to show that he's arrived and he's really made it. He's got a beautiful barn and he builds just a hideous house for himself--and it's expensive. You can't build anything that hideous cheaply. [laughter]

Nathan: What do you think of Fuller's geodesic dome idea?

Lanier: I love the geodesic dome. I find it very difficult to use. I would be personally loath to try to adapt them to anything other than their simplest statement, which is enclosing a big amount of space with a very lightweight structure. I couldn't abide one made up into a house and to make living space out of it, I don't think.

Nathan: How did you come to find this house that you live in now?

Lanier: We looked for a couple of years. We were very cramped in our little house, our little 1890 Victorian. We looked and a friend found it for us. They had tried to buy it and when they were through trying to buy it, then we came and looked at it and bought it on the spot the same evening that we looked at it.

Nathan: The spaces are certainly wonderful.

Lanier: We had been looking for a long time and then we proceeded to work on it for a year before we moved into it because it was in very bad condition, very bad shape.

Nathan: Is there a style that you could--

Lanier: I think this room certainly--this room and the dining room, the entrance--were certainly greatly influenced by Maybeck.

Nathan: Yes. Is this redwood?

Lanier: No, it's fir, Douglas fir stained--stained once when it was built in 1908.

Family and the Purpose of Sharing

Nathan: Thinking of the many things that you have done, I wonder if you would care to speculate how it was that you were a "liberated" man before this was even a popular term and long before other young men thought the same way.

Lanier: Liberated in what way?

Nathan: In the role of the family, the way you share responsibilities, having a wife who is an artist and a professional, not (as you were saying) like your mother who was very much a mother and a gardener.

Lanier: Yes, but I think that my mother was probably fairly frustrated in outlets for her creativity. I think she would have been much nicer to have been around if she had greater outlets for it and I don't think that can be laid at my father's feet because in a sense he was liberated too. I guess I don't really consider myself terribly liberated [pauses] but I think maybe I was always liberated. [laughter]

Nathan: That's the best kind!

Lanier: I think in a way my father was liberated. I wanted to be around someone who does something, preferably in the arts, and I realized that she (my wife) can't do that unless--"help" is the wrong word--unless I help to make it possible. I mean with the family as big as ours was, she simply couldn't do that and take full responsibility for the household and the bringing up of the children all by herself. It just couldn't work. We have always worked together and we have always worked separately.

I think it would be really dreadful to be stuck with a wife that didn't have her own interests, some of them divergent from yours so that in old age (which is fast approaching) you were saddled with someone who had nothing to do, who had no interests, who you had to think of entertaining. I think that would be dreadful.

Nathan: Did all these thoughts go through your mind when you were a young person in college?

Lanier: Probably not, they probably weren't well formed enough to consider them thoughts, but I think they were there. [laughter] You know, a thought is something concrete; it lurks over there like a cloud. [laughter] I think mine was more kind of a general fog, not one nice compact cloud but a fog that kind of moves through your head. It depends. If the floor's really a mess, maybe you clean it up instead of waiting for someone to come in to do it or your wife to get time to do it or even grab some of the kids and say, "Let's clean this up."

Nathan: How many children do you have?

Lanier: We have six.

Nathan: Did you sort of make up this number?

Lanier: This magic number? No, I think maybe Ruth made up that number, but I didn't make up that number. I think I was very concerned that maybe there were too many children or we were having too many children. I don't know what I thought was the perfect number, whether it was just four or what, but I never started out to have six children. I think maybe Ruth had that in mind all along or more. She really wanted a lot of children.

Nathan: But you were family-minded, you wanted a family.

Lanier: Oh, yes. We knew that we wanted a family and we wanted them while we were young. We didn't want them all that stretched out. I think now it gives us a chance to devote some time to other than child-rearing together. So far we haven't [laughter] but I keep thinking that we will, sooner or later.

Nathan: Well, you've both been involved in what one might call community activities. Was this a conscious choice?

Lanier: Yes, thinking that maybe you should be involved a little, maybe you should do something for your town or your part of the town. There again, it's tended on my part to be very specific until recently when I went on the Landmarks Board for the city. Before that, I went on the board of the American Youth Hostels which is broader than my immediate community.

Rewards and Consistency

Nathan: Was this out of a feeling that one should contribute?

Lanier: Yes, and I think we've been very specific with the kids. Really what we're expecting of them--or hoping for them--we hope many things for them, but hoping they'll be able to take care of themselves and maybe a few more, do a little more than take care of yourself. I do think that taking care of yourself is first, but hopefully there'd be enough energy or strength to take care of a little more--make a contribution, get gratification out of what you're doing, don't spend most of your life in a dull job and try to liberate yourself at forty-five. That's terribly late, I think, to start liberating yourself from a job you've hated all those years. It's particularly common today, awfully common.

Nathan: To be in a job you hate?

Lanier: That you hate; and to find youself changing courses or wandering around looking for something, at what I consider past middle-age. Middle-age for me is still thirty-five. I'm not middle-aged anymore.

Nathan: You take a biblical stance?

Lanier: No, I think the life expectancy of men is still somewhere around seventy. So the middle of that is thirty-five; after that, you're really on the down slope. I consider myself a senior citizen almost.

Nathan: So you do advocate this liberation.

Lanier: I advocate liberation and I still think it's too high-flown or fashionable a word for whatever I have, liberation. As I said, I don't consider myself terribly liberated.

Nathan: Back again to your point of the age of forty-five, about taking a new direction--

Lanier: I think that's distressing to me that at this late date you have to start looking for a new direction. I think that's too late generally. Maybe it's because I don't want to take a new direction, [laughter] I'm not looking for a new direction. I guess with people who need it, it's better late than never.

Nathan: But you've found your general direction.

Lanier: I believe in consistency. I believe in following a straight line. I don't believe in ten, fifteen, twenty years in San Francisco and then Phoenix for the next ten and maybe if that doesn't hold your interest, try Minnesota or Virginia. I really believe, despite the fact that I left my roots very much in settling in San Francisco, I think now that I have done that I'd like to stick with it. It's really too late for me to go back to where I came from. It's really too late for me to do that.

Nathan: Had you ever given thought to that as a possibility?

Lanier: I think that would have been a second course and who knows how different it would have been. I think San Francisco has been an infinitely better place for Ruth. I'm less sure about my own work, whether this would have been a better place than plugging away there in the South. It might have been much better for me--better in that I would have done more substantial work. Why would I have done more substantial work? Falling back on family connections, the familiar--

Nathan: It's true that you break new ground by yourself, but it's a very difficult thing to do.

Lanier: On the other hand, I might have gotten caught up in that church scene, Kiwanis Club. It might have been just a dismal thing for me as a creative person.

Nathan: Do you feel at home now in San Francisco?

Lanier: Very much so, and I don't feel not at home there when I'm there. It's strange and I tend to be critical of things there, but I don't feel not at home. I don't feel as "not at home," as I do in Southern California, when I'm in Georgia. Undoubtedly, I would find places in the suburbs of San Francisco where I would feel terribly not at home. It has an awful lot to do with the people you're seeing in these places, whether their attitudes make you think, "Where am I? [laughter] How did I get here? I must be lost!"

Nathan: In addition to having the opportunity to do the kind of designs that you want to do and have an interesting and certainly rewarding wife and family, what else do you look for in the setting of San Francisco?

Lanier: Well, I don't take advantage of them. I don't take advantage of them on the basis of time, or that's the excuse I give, but the music is here, the libraries are here. I rarely spend thirty minutes in the horticulture library out at the arboretum. I keep thinking I'm going to spend Saturday afternoon out there. I've never done it, but it's all here. It's a marvelous place and I think a marvelous place to bring up a family, right in the city. I think it has to be a fairly close family for that to work well. I'm not sure that it works well with a loose family.

By "loose family," what do I mean by that? I mean, well, I really mean that the family is not close and that the parents aren't prompting the children, helping the children take advantage of what's here. We have an awful lot of that. We have an awful lot of families that operate that way, that look at the schools as the custodians of their children for X number of hours a day, X number of months a year. We never have looked at the schools here in that light. We look at the schools as something that the kids need and that we are able to give them. We aren't looking at them in terms of custodial care.

Nathan: You spoke of "prompting" children--is that basically what you feel is a parental--

Lanier: I think that you have to exert a certain amount of pressure on children, to have them do things. [child enters and says "hi!"]

Nathan: Is this a family member?

Lanier: That's my grandson. That's Ken.

Nathan: Well, he shouldn't have to be quiet. Can he come in and say hello?

Lanier: Yes, come and say hello to Grandpa. [tape interruption]

Nathan: We should have left it on to get his explanation.

Lanier: [laughter] Of how the road he will build for his truck is going to go all around.

Nathan: How the road is going to go all around and all the rocks are going to be taken out. He has a real sense of grading because he was making this kind of a rising, swerving gesture.

Lanier: Yes, he's just amazing to watch. I just love watching him.

Nathan: Yes. I was interested in your view of the quality of life and knowing your direction and what satisfactions you look for.

Lanier: I'm not so sure that I knew the direction, but I came to accept it and am not unhappy with it and try to get a little satisfaction all along rather than--

Nathan: Rather than delaying everything?

Lanier: That's right. I think so. Try to make each day feel that there's something good about it, and something got accomplished. Sometimes it's very, very slight. [laughter] You have to look very hard! And ignore the frustrations, try to ignore the frustrations.

Clients and Design

Nathan: Have you found that there was any sort of activity more rewarding to you than others? Is it in design?

Lanier: Well, in my work I think it's design and to some extent dealing with the people, having them come to feel and be specific about what it is they want, what expression they want the building to make about their way of living or their way of working, and that's very gratifying.

Nathan: So there's a sort of rapport?

Lanier: Yes, very often when you ask people for a program they give you a kind of badly written Sunset article.

Nathan: When you say program you mean--

Lanier: A program of what they want to do, either how they want to alter their house or how they want to build their new one, what they want their new one to do for them.

Nathan: Oh, so you ask your client.

Lanier: Yes, sure. I mean you don't decide what that person should have-- or I don't. We have to discuss it. When you ask them to write out a program, which is one way of working, they usually give you a very chewed up, badly written kind of check list from Sunset. [laughter] Very often you never get a program. You only visually arrive at a program with drawings.

Nathan: Is it because they don't know what they want or because they can't explain it?

Lanier: They don't know, they don't know. They haven't thought about it. They haven't looked. They've read, very often they've read a lot of magazines, but they haven't looked. Particularly in domestic architecture, there's a tremendous amount of magazines on this and it's a very big business--selling furniture, selling appliances, having family rooms, how family rooms get furnished. Maybe they'd really just rather sit around the table than have a plush sectional sofa. But they don't think that way, or typically, the older people have done more thinking than the younger people have. They've had more experience.

Nathan: That is, more personal looking and less reading of magazines?

Lanier: That's right, that's right, and no note-taking when we're talking. Let's talk and listen and look, but let's don't take notes while we're doing it. I've very often had to say to clients, "Let's don't take notes. You're too busy writing to think." Or the person who is concerned as to whether the room is 12 X 14 or whether it's 16 X 18, writing down those dimensions means absolutely nothing and you very often encounter the housewife or the wife who simply wants to write down the dimensions. Well, the dimensions are all going to be on the drawing ultimately anyway. You really have to think about what the space is going to do and how it's going to work for you rather than the rug size that you can put into it!

Nathan: It's sort of product-oriented, isn't it?

Lanier: [laughter] That's right.

Nathan: What you want from the clients is for them to say what they like to do and how their lives are actually spent?

Lanier: That's right.

Nathan: And they can't tell you that?

Lanier: Very often they can't. Some people are more articulate than others. But this big element of thinking what they should do in their economic situation or this period of life or whatever achievement that they've made that's making this possible, what is appropriate to that rather than what it is that they might want or that they might get great joy from seeing and using. It might even say something particular about them. We very often have tried to get clients to do something specific--I mean physically do something in their job, maybe carve the front door or do a mosaic somewhere. It's very hard. They're really terribly scared to reveal themselves that way because that is directly traceable to them--not the decorator, not the architect--and people generally don't want to take responsibility for something themselves.

Nathan: They would rather be advised?

Lanier: They'd rather be advised, rather be guaranteed that it's going to be in good taste, guaranteed that it's in good taste either by Sunset or by the decorator or who else has used the decorator or even a trade name. A trade name is very often a big guarantee for these people.

Nathan: Can you encourage people to take risks?

Lanier: Yes, but there are some people that simply can't. They're not going to take risks but you can encourage them to. Of course, you have to tell them that there's a gamble in it. [laughter] It may not work, it may not work! It might be a dreadful mistake.

Self-Knowledge and Folk Gardens

Nathan: What you've been saying has sort of suggested to me your value in self-knowledge and self-direction--whatever your taste, just go with it.

Lanier: That's right. I love folk art. I love folk gardens. I'd like to sometime do a little study on folk gardens, that is a garden that says something particular about the person who built it or who made it.

Nathan: If you could build your own garden, what would it be like? Not necessarily what size, but--

Lanier: I think it would have to depend on where it was, very much. I mean how big it is, what the climate is, what the limitations are. If I were building a garden in Georgia that I was going to maintain and live in, it probably would try to be something like Monet's garden.

Nathan: Ah, lily ponds?

Lanier: Ponds and bridges and trees and vines and wisteria. You really need the kind of time that Monet put in on that. He put in forty years on his garden. Time's running out for me. I may just have to make my garden right here. [laughter]

Nathan: All right, then let's say a San Francisco garden in the Noe Valley. What are the dimensions roughly?

Lanier: [laughter] Well, I actually have a lot of land here! I've got about 8,500 square feet of land here. I have about a fifth of an acre. [laughter] Of course, a lot of it's covered with buildings, but if I intensively poke things in all the crevices of rock and clean the buildings and things it really is a lot of land. To exploit that completely I think could be a pretty exciting project. I don't know who will maintain it when I'm gone. Probably nobody will maintain it when I'm gone. Low-maintenance gardens are big things. I don't want a low-maintenance garden. [laughter]

Nathan: You want a high-maintenance garden?

Lanier: I don't think so. [laughter]

Nathan: I gather you want lots of flowers?

Lanier: Well, I want the vegetables too. I want the vegetables too. I mean I like the vegetables to be pretty because I'm really not that interested in eating them when I get down to it. I really don't like salad very much, but I love to grow lettuce. I don't like chard at all, but I love to plant it. [laughter] I hate cabbage, but I'd love to have cabbage in my garden.

Nathan: These are esthetic objects?

Lanier: They're esthetic objects and it appeals to me, vegetables appeal to me, not because I want to eat them, but because I just like the idea that you could eat them. [laughter] And Ruth likes them. My father did that when he was still able to. He had an enormous garden and he spent all of his time cultivating and then at harvest he spent all of his time harvesting it and giving it away.

Nathan: There's something very delightful about that whole idea.

Lanier: It kept him very strong until he was almost ninety.

Nathan: And the sharing idea is nice. Would you have any trees?

Lanier: Oh, I have them already. It's a jungle practically, already. [laughter]

Nathan: Would you grow rhubarb because it's pretty?

Lanier: I have rhubarb. Yes, I have rhubarb, I have Jerusalem artichokes and the other artichoke, just plain artichoke. I have a grape vine that's bearing. I have a huge olive tree that bears. I have plum trees that bear very heavily. I have an apricot tree. I have a lemon tree that isn't bearing. I have found an avocado tree in San Francisco that bears very heavily. I don't know if it's possible to graft from that tree to another tree. I guess what I'm saying is that I really like to torture plants. [laughter]

Nathan: If you're nice to people, you can torture plants, that's all right.

Lanier: That's right, and they're very sure if you water them, if you water them and put the right end up, it's very likely to grow. [laughter]

Nathan: That gives you the satisfaction for the day?

Lanier: That's right. It's a very good way. I've known lots of people that have gone in for gardening. Marguerite Wildenhain, the potter, has a marvelous time. Hers is not a folk garden but it certainly should be photographed while she's maintaining it, while she's putting it in. It would make a beautiful photographic essay.

Nathan: Have you ever given thought to doing that?

Lanier: Yes, I'd like to do that. I think it would be very good to do it on artists. It's not necessary that they be artists. It might be a postman that would have such a garden.

Nathan: You call them folk gardens?

Lanier: Folk gardens. A folk garden might not even have plants in it. It might be like the one up in, I think it's Eureka, that's all windmills and wooden flowers that this guy spent years building. [laughter] And then there are people who work with stone. There's one here in the city where a man casts things in concrete and he gets his model at the dime store and then comes back and models it life-size in concrete. When it's a tiny little knickknack from the dime store it's not so ludicrous, but when you get it life-size with his interpretation--but I like that. [tape interruption]

IV SOME FAMILY RECORDS

Nathan: You were saying that your father had tape recorded an oral history; where?

Lanier: For the University of Georgia. That would have been some time in the last few years, certainly in his eighties. That was done. Probably some prodding on my sister's, the journalism teacher's, part was responsible for that being done. I don't know.

Nathan: Have you heard it or read it?

Lanier: No, I haven't heard it, but he was also very big on the use of the tape recorder anyway. He would tape interviews in his legal work so that there is probably a ton of tape lying in the office somewhere; I don't know what will happen with it. I guess it will get thrown out or be stuck in someone's box for years until they throw it out. But he did complete his own oral history. Yes, that was done completely. I never heard it but I know that it's reposing there at the University of Georgia.

Nathan: That's interesting. Have any other members of your family been taped as far as you know?

Lanier: Well, my brother who practiced law was also taped a great deal and he was also very big on home movies. This was very fortunate because he and his wife and their oldest child all died in one automobile accident maybe fourteen years ago and so the younger children, the surviving children, now have those and they really know their parents primarily through those home movies.

Nathan: That's something one wouldn't think of.

Lanier: In recent years they have gone through the whole lot.

Nathan: Did they take the movies each year?

Lanier: Yes, he took many movies each year, and they treasure them. There were years where they did not see them, but in recent years they've gone through all of them.

Nathan: In a sense there is, I think, a value in these oral histories too. You can reach across the generations in a real way and this big two-year-old boy who came in to see us will be reading it presently.

Thank you for reflecting on your experiences and ideas, and for your perceptions about the quality of life.. Of course your children and grandchildren will enjoy what you have to say, and so will many others who are trying to find their own way.

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